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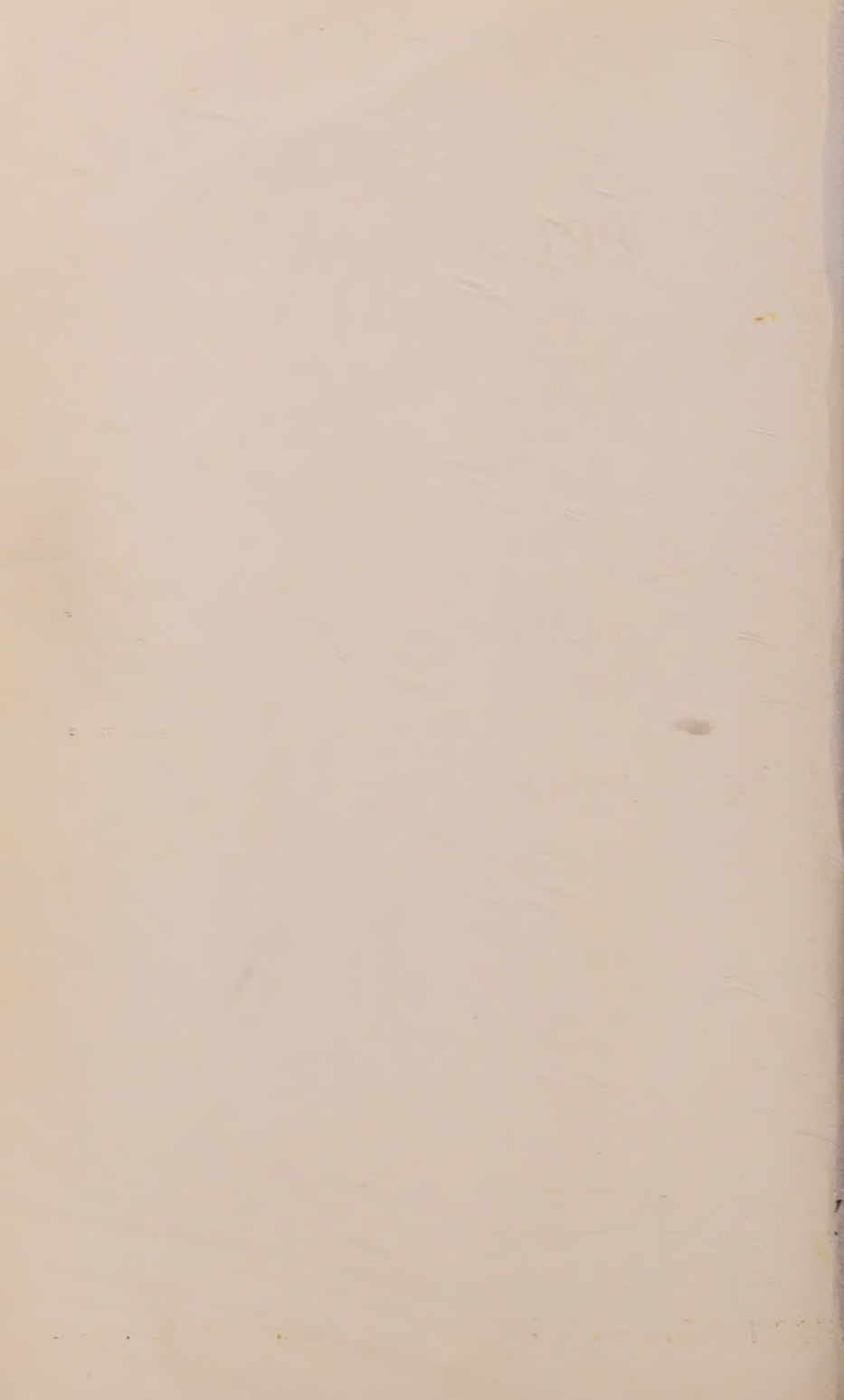
BIBLE AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Edited by

J. C. Manalel

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This Issue is Dedicated to the Women Workers
throughout the world

Bible and Women's Liberation

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Editorial

All theology worth the name must be integrally liberative. But traditional theology failed to give any emphasis to this all important aspect of human life. Thanks to Liberation Theology, the liberative content and potential of the Bible have been brought to light. Suspicions had arisen about certain ideologies behind the traditional interpretation of the Bible and so the need was felt, for sometime long, especially in the "Third World" countries for a re-reading and re-interpretation of the Bible, as a result of which tremendous progress has been made in biblical hermeneutics so that Scripture is today understood in a new perspective and God too.

There are people who still think that God has spoken once for all and that they know about God all that they should. So they are not sufficiently attentive to what God speaks today. They can hardly see the inexhaustible riches of the Divinity manifested in the continuous growth of humanity, in the radical changes taking place in every sphere of life and in the giant strides the world is taking on its way to progress. They would dub it all 'secular'. This is more or less true of all established religions.

But God has never ceased to speak, God speaks ever anew in every event, in every change. Every man or woman in need is God's urgent word to us; the more his/her need the more its urgency. Emancipation of women is part and parcel of liberation which is the greatest need of the hour and which will never become a reality unless, along with the struggle against oppression of the poor and the outcaste, that against patriarchy and other kinds of male chauvinism also continues with the same zest and determination. They are one and the same struggle for liberation.

The theme we have taken up for discussion in this issue of *Jeevadhara* is: 'Bible and Women's Liberation'. Considering the patriarchal culture and the consequent social pressures and constraints prevalent at the time when the different books of the Bible were written, the question of the emancipation of women, as it is understood today, did not then arise at all. Despite all that, modern exegesis has shown that the Bible is much more positive than was ever thought, about the equality of man and woman and the liberation of the latter. It is the Church that has watered down the ideal in the course of centuries. What the authors of the articles are trying to do is to identify the basic teaching of the Bible in a welter of cultural and social elements.

Woman in Creation Story

Israel's experience of God as the Lord of history led them to a vision of their national history as the gradual unfolding of salvation history. Liberation from slavery in Egypt and the emergence of their identity as the people of God through the unique experience of a covenant with Yahweh were central to their religion. The same two events led to the formation of their nation also. Their patriarchal history was preserved and set as a fitting prologue not only to the narrative of their slavery in Egypt but also and especially to their election from among the nations.

With the unfolding of the salvation history, the people of Israel came to understand that Yahweh was not merely an ethnic God and the Lord of their national history but He was the One God, the Lord of the whole universe, who shaped the history of all nations. So their salvation history was stretched back to the origins of the universe.

The people of Israel were surrounded by peoples of different faiths and cosmogonies, with the worship of many deities. To solve the problem of evil, they had among the pantheon some personified as principles of evil. Using such mythologies as raw material, the authors of Genesis composed the creation narratives as vehicles of Israel's faith. It was not an easy task to purge the mythological stories of their polytheistic content and to make them the medium of their faith in one God who is good and who creates only what is good. But with divine assistance, the sacred writers could accomplish it. Thus we have the first chapters of the book of Genesis.

Of the Yahwist and the Priestly accounts of creation, chronologically, the former precedes the latter. So we will take that first for our analysis.

The Yahwist account of Creation: Genesis Ch.2.

While the Yahwist account of the patriarchal history came from

an earlier tradition kept alive through oral transmission, there is no indication to prove that the primeval history had such a pre-existent source. It seems to have come from the Yahwist's own prophetic inspiration and insight which he used with the freedom and skill of an enlightened spiritual master. He belonged to the period of Solomon, i.e., 10c B.C. So he must have thrived in the free atmosphere of intuitive thinking that came to the people who enjoyed peace, prosperity and national greatness after a long period of wandering and war. So in the Bible, the Yahwist shines out as a theologian and spiritual master par excellence.

His prophetic inspiration reached its peak in the composition of the story of creation and fall in chs. 2 and 3 of the book of Genesis. According to the Yahwist, God's role in shaping Israel's history was not confined to intermittent interventions such as the call of the patriarchs, promises made, deliverance from slavery, covenant that gave them their identity as the people of God and formation of their theocratic nation. God related Himself to the human family from the very origin of the species and it was His will to save His erring children that shaped the histories of nations.

The literary form of the Yahwist account of creation is a story. As said earlier, the sacred writer could not have drawn the material from an earlier tradition because there is no parallel. His inspired genius and prophetic insight seem to be the sources. In order to understand the message, we must know what the words and images used in the story meant for the writer. The sense content of a word or an image comes from the historical, geographical and cultural background of the writer and the stock of his own experience. Therefore without a sound knowledge of them, we shall not be able to grasp the message he is trying to give. Moreover we have to understand how the story is built up gradually, what the movements of the characters are leading to and how the message gets crystallised.

The historical situation of the Yahwist is the prosperous monarchical period of Solomon. After years of wandering, conquest and the period of a theocratic settlement, Israel emerged as a mighty nation and won a place of dignity in the galaxy of nations of the civilized world. With that came many changes in the attitudes and social behaviour. Though Israel had known polygamy

in its patriarchal ancestors, the harems of David and Solomon were a new dimension in their history. In this institution, marriage took place not because the king wanted a wife or loved a woman but because it was an easy means to establish and strengthen a political alliance. At the time of king Solomon, his harem was expanded to an extraordinary degree, even if one makes allowance for the probably exaggerated biblical number. As the kingdom spread and got strengthened, more and more princesses and ladies from foreign countries were brought to the harem. Following the example of the king, there developed a national attitude that woman was a mere pawn in the life of man to satisfy his interest. She was the symbol of man's prosperity and was counted among his possessions. The Hebrew patriarchal society was not uncondemned to women's equality. But the monarchical structure and the affluent sophisticated life that followed in its wake brought about an attitude towards women that was downright humiliating.

In the books of the Bible the Yahwist is outstanding in his keen spiritual perception and deep theology. With his prophetic insight he dives into the existing social situation to understand how God must have planned human life in the beginning.

The prophetic heart of Israel always sensed in city civilisation a departure of its people from their idyllic relationship with Yahweh. So the Yahwist was sure that the way things were happening in the society starting with the king's palace was not what was intended by God. Since he could not fix a time anywhere in the patriarchal history for a pristine, sinless, egalitarian society he took it to the very origin of the human species and made it a state that was lost before it was found.

With his keen mind, the Yahwist understood that the relationship between the male and female of the human species was foundational for all social structure. So in the lucidity of his faith in the faithful God, he saw Him planning an ideal marriage between one man and one woman. In his vision, the relationship between these two surpassed all other relationships ever known.

There are people who say that it was man who was created first and woman was created only to be of help to him. Thus they would see the Yahwist pointing out a lower place for woman. They would claim that this was her God assigned role even at the time of her origin in the state of paradisaal innocence.

Since woman was created for man, he was definitely superior. On the contrary, the feminists say that while man was made of the earth, woman was fashioned out of a part of human body and so of better stuff and hence man's superior.

As said earlier, in order to understand what the Yahwist intended to teach, we must understand the movement of the characters and towards what they are moving. In the society of his time, woman was considered a piece of property perhaps more useful than the animals. Even some of the laws put her on a par with one's possessions. For example:

"You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife or his man servant or his maid servant, or his ox or his ass or anything that is your neighbour's." (Ex. 20:17)

So a woman's role was to help man in her way just as the cattle help him in their own way. But the Yahwist with his inspired intuition saw this as an expression of perversion of the right order and so sinful. In God's plan man and woman were equal. To impress this fact on the mind of the people of his time Yahweh is represented as leading the animals in a procession to Adam. It is significant to note that though Adam accepted them all as useful, he was not satisfied because among them he did not find an equal so as to be a fitting companion to him.

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'. So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him." (Gen. 2:19)

So the movement of the story beautifully progresses from the utter loneliness of Adam, through the presence of useful living creatures that only accentuate the loneliness by their incapacity to be his companions, to the ecstasy of delight in discovering the companionship of an equal:

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh

She shall be called Woman

because she was taken out of man." (Gen. 2:33)

Some pick up the word 'helper' in 2:18 and say that if woman was created to help man then it follows that she does not have an existence of her own. Here again we have to insist that in interpreting Scripture, it is of paramount importance to follow the mind of the author. Meanings that are at variance with his thinking are not counted as scriptural. In the mind of the author God wanted to give man a helper who will remove his loneliness. The parade of animals is meant to impinge on the minds of the people of his time that animals can be one's property but no fitting companion for man. So the help intended here is real companionship that can be given only by an equal.

Now let us consider the argument that woman was made of better stuff than man. The author's intention is not to compare earth and bone as materials to shape a human body with, but to show that man and woman complement one another. According to another reasoning, as the second and final attempt of God in creating a satisfactory human specimen, woman is an improvement on man. So far, I have heard such arguments only in talks and I am not aware of any books that build on such reasoning. In these statements there is a legitimate reaction to the society's devaluation of woman. At the same time one can easily see that such interpretations are not scriptural. In order to get at the scriptural sense one must try to find why the sacred writer used the image of the rib. Why God has been conceived of performing an inside surgery on man to create woman? If she had to be bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, any external part of man's anatomy could have been just as useful. Why then the rib? In the ancient middle east, this was an aetiological story for explaining why the rib-cage covered only half of one's torso and not the whole. God used half the rib-cage to make a woman. So now man and woman are living with half the rib-cage each. At the time of the Yahwist, the actual question regarding the incomplete rib-cage might not have been there. But with the freedom of an inspired artist, he used this symbol to break through the male-dominated consciousness of his society and create an awareness in his people that woman was in dignity equal to man and that by lording it over woman, man was humiliating himself. If human consciousness had not

been dulled by sin, it would have been quite natural for man to recognise woman as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh and treat her with equal respect.

Then comes the Yahwist's most astounding statement:

"Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh."

This surely is a point of departure from the customs of ancient Israel. From the patriarchal times it was the woman who left her father and mother to join her husband. According to Von Rad this statement perhaps had come from an early matriarchal culture¹. But the Yahwist was not proposing a matriarchal culture for the simple fact that the solution to male domination is not female domination. He made this declaration as though he was stating a contemporary practice but in fact it was his own creative conclusion to his original story. It was the result of his intuitive reflection on what could be the plan of God while the nucleus of the human society, namely, a family, emerged. He sees the entire patriarchal structure of his society as the consequence of sin. Nor did he envisage a matriarchal structure as a solution. According to him, God's design was an egalitarian society: Since the present structure was patriarchal, the Yahwist made man step out of the security of his father's home. If only man could recognise in woman his equal and leave his parents to make a home with her, he would have such fulfilment in life! In the male dominated structure this fulfilment was denied to him. He had to cling on to his parental home for security and subjugate woman in order to feel himself strong. Even a grown-up man was known only as the son of his father.

On the contrary, if he would leave his father and mother and live with his wife on terms of equality, he would find not only happiness in her but also integration and fulness in his own life. We should not look on this statement as a directive telling where a man should live after marriage. But it is a prophetic statement that strikes at the root of male domination and lays the foundation for a just society.

Another surprising revelation coming from this ancient theologian is that the distinction of sexes in the divine plan was

1. Von Rad, Gerhard, *Genesis*, SCM Press Ltd., London (1963) p. 85.

primarily meant for the ecstasy of companionship, feeling of oneness and fulfilment, constituting the most beautiful and intimate of relationships. It is significant that he did not speak of procreation as the primary aim of creating man and woman. Perhaps as a prophet his concern was to highlight the relationship between man and woman and give it greater emphasis because it was not found in his society. Considering the period of his societal history it is indeed a rare insight.

With the proclamation of the fundamental rule for a just society, the curtain falls and the readers have the satisfaction at having seen a wonderful drama in a new vision. Indeed in the story of creation in ch. 2, the Yahwist has projected his own vision of an egalitarian society. What we see in the story of the fall in ch. 3 of Genesis is a sad leap from God's plan for the human society to what the humans have contrived to make for themselves. Since the image of woman in the christian world stems from the story of the fall, it becomes necessary to analyse this section of the Bible.

Christian theologians and especially spiritual masters from patristic times had constructed an image of woman which is strongly negative. She is the temptress, the seducer, weak-willed, highly emotional and devoid of logical thinking. She is a sex symbol. So in man's dealings with her she is either to be feared, avoided, subjugated, used or ignored. Otherwise she will be man's ruin. Perhaps it began with Mary/Eve comparison starting with Justin the Martyr of the 2nd century. In the mind of the Christian thinkers who came after, all women were daughters of Eve and shared the above mentioned qualities. Mary's greatness was in being different from the rest of women. To top it all, they identified the Eve of their imagination with the biblical Eve who according to the sacred writer was the mother of all living.

Once again let us remind ourselves that in order to understand the mind of the sacred writer, we must try to get the meanings of the words and symbols used by him. The story of the fall is a collection of skillfully interwoven aetiologies. Using these stories, he wanted to show that the contemporary unjust society was sinful. The root cause of the sad state of affairs was sin. To bring this out, he created a story using symbols that

were meaningful to his people and linked the story to some primitive aetiologies from a very ancient past to explain some curious phenomena such as why the fearsome reptile did not have legs to walk inspite of its big size; why the joyful event of the birth of a child was marked by such searing pain for the woman; why the woman inspite of the pain of child bearing and the humiliations heaped on her by the dominating male, still craved for him; why the cultivated crops grew so reluctantly while thorns and thistles grew abundantly on their own; why man had to die while from his innermost being he desired immortality.

But in bringing together all these aetiologies, the Yahwist had his own point to make that everything in creation was affected by sin. To describe sin he employed images that were meaningful to his contemporaries. In order to unravel his message, we have to understand his words and symbols.

From the time of the conquest, the fertility cult of the Canaanites was an ever present lure for Israel. This lure at times had proved to be irresistibly strong, especially so at the time of the Yahwist, i.e., during the glorious reign of Solomon. The pious of Israel had just witnessed the degradation of their wise king after his marriages with the foreign princesses. He who built the majestic house of God also built sanctuaries for the heathen deities which according to Israel were just lies. The great sin in Israel was infidelity to Yahweh (1 Kg. 11:1-10).

It was from this background, that the Yahwist built up his story. Snake was a well known symbol for Baal of the fertility cult. In the biblical story, the serpent is the tempter because in Israel's history, the fertility gods had been real tempters, drawing Israel away from Yahweh. The forbidden fruit could be the raisin cakes used in Asherah worship in fertility cult (Hos. 3:1). There is no need to discuss what was the sin committed by the first human couple. The Yahwist story is talking about the actual sinful situation in Israel. Like all prophets, he addressed his message to his people.

Now the big question is what made the christians down through the centuries to think that the weak-willed Eve seduced Adam to commit sin. In the story the serpent tempts the woman but the woman herself does not tempt man. Temptation or seduction takes place only where one party shows unwillingness and

the other desires to draw that unwilling party to its side. In the biblical story there is no trace of Adam's unwillingness. Eve gives and unresistingly Adam takes and eats. The Yahwist is describing Israel's easy acceptance of the fertility cult due to their marriage alliances with foreigners. But from the patristic times, woman had been cast into the role of seducer. This unjust slur on woman's reputation is strengthened and perpetuated by the way women are socialised in the male-dominated society.

Due to the strong mutual attraction between the sexes, a man can seduce a woman as much as a woman can seduce a man. It is not only a possibility but also a reality. But it is only woman who is portrayed as the seducer. There could be two reasons for this. First of all most speakers and writers are men and so they speak only from their point of view. Another possibility is that man sees woman as a threat to his ego while a woman does not consider man so. This fear is the source of male domination. Those who are confident of their own power need not dominate others to prove it whereas those who lack such confidence have to prove it to themselves and to others by domination and aggression.

Whatever the psychological implications may be, the important point is that the Yahwist does not portray Eve as a seducer. Even in the court of divine justice while Eve says that the serpent beguiled her and she ate (Gen. 3:13) Adam simply says that the woman gave him the fruit and he ate (Gen. 3:12). So to say that woman is seen by the Yahwist as the seducer is wrong. Moreover the capacity of the male to seduce the female and vice versa belongs to the field of psychology and not to revelation. The message of the story of the fall is that the male-dominated society is in a sinful state. It is the perversion of the original just society intended by God.

The Priestly account of Creation: Gen. Ch. I:1-2:4a

The format of the narrative with six days work followed by sabbath has a highly liturgical flavour. The climactic point of God's work is the creation of the human persons in God's own image and likeness.

"God created man in his own image
in the image of God he created him
male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:26)

The synonymous parallelism in these lines is obvious. Parallelism in Hebrew poetry is rhyming of thought. In synonymous parallelism the thought stated in the first clause is repeated in the second and the third (if there is a third) in different words. So in v. 26, once we accept that it is synonymous parallelism, then we have to accept that the thought stated in the first clause is repeated in the second (this is quite evident) and the same is repeated in the third. The third clause completes the thought and the sentence. Thus it would seem that for the priestly writer, the image of God is male and female.

If this is what the sacred writer wanted to say, what did he really mean by it? Did he attribute sex to God? Did he think that God had a form and man was created in the image of that form? The priestly writer was centuries removed from the anthropomorphic expressions of the earlier Yahwistic period. Not only the religious thinking in Israel had grown to be more sophisticated but as the representative of the priestly class his expressions have theological and liturgical quality. So we have to find out what he meant by the phrase "image of God".

In the past many interpreters located the image of God in the human person's spiritual soul. But the priestly writer could not have meant that because the Jews were not familiar with the idea of a human person as composed of two constituents namely the material body and the spiritual soul. So it is more likely that the human person as a whole was meant to be the image of God.

In the ancient civilized world, the kings put up their images in the various provinces of their kingdom. This image was supposed to make his presence felt in places under his dominion. Similarly in the ancient Middle East people had images of numerous deities. In this practice the image is the symbol of some prominent characteristic of the deity. For example, the image of a bull symbolized the Canaanite god El and it signified the power and fertility of El. The Canaanites believed that the spirit of El dwelt in the image and such images made the presence of El felt by the people in many places where the images were placed.

From the above mentioned practices in the ancient world known to the priestly writer, an image can mean the following

1. a kind of representation that makes the represented present
2. a sign that the lordship of the one represented by the image extends to the place where the image is placed
3. symbol of the qualities of the one represented.

In the first chapter of Genesis the priestly writer could have meant all three because being a man of his time the word could have suggested these meanings.

From this we infer that man and woman equally make God's presence felt in the world. In Israel's growth towards maturity, education and achievement of goals, it experienced the male and female qualities of God.

"As the father pities his children

so the Lord pities those who fear him." (Ps. 103:13)

"Can a woman forget her sucking child

that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?

Even these may forget yet I will not forget you" (Is. 49:15)

The human species, as male and female, reflects God in these two aspects. God created woman so that she may manifest the female face of the divine and the male was created to show forth the male aspect of God. These aspects are different but equally divine. The question is not, which is more noble, but is rather how nobly a person expresses it. Man and woman, in different ways, are equal in dignity. Added to this the human species reflects God's domination or lordship over creation. The presence of man and woman on earth is a constant reminder that the earth is the Lord's, just as an image of a king in a city shows that the city is under that king's rule.

After creation, the Lord did not leave it to drift. He is guiding it so that it grows towards its goal. So the presence of man and woman on earth is a sign that the Lord's governance is there and that He is leading the world towards its final goal.

Israel's knowledge of God's qualities came from their experience of deliverance from Egypt, of entering into covenant and of a life based on this covenantal relationship. The two important qualities that Israel delight in mentioning again and again about their God are *hesed* and *emet* – the enduring, compassion-

ate love and fidelity to His promises. Israel knew from experience that though they were very often unfaithful to the covenant, Yahweh was always faithful. So man and woman are symbols of God's enduring compassionate love and fidelity. The husband is the image of God's *hesed* and *emet* to his wife and so is she to him. The human society is built up around this nucleus. Moreover God's *hesed* and *emet* are mediated to the human beings through other persons, with the result that the entire human society acknowledging the presence and Lordship of God is the kingdom of God imbued with these qualities.

As a conclusion to this analysis I would like to make just one point. Both accounts of creation teach the equality of man and woman. The Yahwist account goes one step further and says that the inequality resulting from male-domination is the outcome of sin. The Church must be a force pushing the world on towards the paradisaal egalitarian society. If it forbids its female members to have the rights it confers on its male members, then in what way can it be the sign of the re-creating, redeeming activity of God in the world? In the church, the sacred seems to be the exclusive domain of the male and the female members are there to do the ground work so that the male members may be maintained in their sacred heights. It is high time that the church took courage to realise the biblical vision of the just society proclaimed in the first two chapters of Genesis.

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Corona Mary

God as Mother in the O. T.

Introduction

To a community steeped in monotheism and to a people committed to a system of unswerving patriarchal loyalty, the concepts "God-Godess" or "God-Mother" would seem not only unthinkable but also abhorrent. Neither the fertility Gods and Goddesses of the Greco-Roman pantheon, nor the multifarious "God-consorts" of Hinduism had any parallel in the religion of the Israelites. Not only has the God of Israel had no consorts, but also there was, on the part of the people, a large scale reluctance in using terms of personal and physical relationships with YHWH. "In view of the usual avoidance in the O.T. of personal concepts of the relationship between God and people, such as are known in the religions of the surrounding peoples, even the statement that Israel is YHWH's son is rare (Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1). It is, however, extremely rare to express the connection between YHWH and Israel by the idea of motherhood, thereby, even indirectly attributing to YHWH the concept of femininity"¹.

It is in this context we would like to examine some of the extraordinary as well as startling images used for God, describing YHWH especially, as a mother (Is. 49:15; 66:13 etc) pregnant with "uterine love" (cf. Jer. 31:20), from the very conception (Ps. 22:9-10) up to ripe old age (Ps. 71:17-18). Of course, since the language used is anthropomorphic, the images themselves are to be understood as interpretative analogies rather than as essential definitions. In the metaphors employed, "the personal reality of

1 Noth, M., *Numbers*, SCM('68) 86. Swidler, L., *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, Philadelphia (1979) 35, however, argues that the term "Elohim" (pl. for God) probably came from the singular feminine form of the word for God, Eloah (fem.), and is likely a residue of a very ancient Semitic female God, Eloah, a male God, El, and a court of female and male Gods, Elohim reflected in this Hebrew biblical usage"

(YHWH's incursion) with human life and history is present and comprehensible. But He transcends the metaphor, is different from that to which He is compared"².

That YHWH is like a *woman* in travail and in labour pains (Is. 42:14)³, that He conceives and brings forth Israel from His maternal womb as a *mother*. (Num 11:12), that He plays the role of a *female nurse* charged by the mother with the care of the child (Num. 11:12)⁴, that He is like a *mistress* who provides food, clothing and other necessities of life (Ps. 123:2), that He is like a *mother-eagle* who stirs up His nest, flutters over His young, spreads His mighty wings and carries him (the young one) over the wide open sky (Dt. 32:11; Ex. 19:4) etc., is something that makes one puzzled, in the context of the fact that this YHWH is exclusively addressed in male categories, such as *Father* (Is. 63:16; 64:8), *Redeemer*⁵ (Is. 41:14; 43:14; 44:6), *Husband* (Is. 54:5; 62:4-5), *Creator* (Is. 40:28; 51:13), *Warrior* (Ex. 15:3; Ps. 24:8), *King* (Ps. 98:6; 99:4) etc.

The only way to understand this is that human beings are the same everywhere and at all times, whether among Israel or in India. The fact that God created "Adam" (i. e., man and woman) "in His own image and likeness" (cf. Gen. 1:26-27), leads to two obvious conclusions namely, that man and woman together complement each other and that at the same time, they reflect in themselves the "feminine-masculine 'face' of God". Although patriarchal obsession among Israel has suppressed the feminine in God, yet religions of the world have not failed to acknowledge this important factor, as is testified to in Near Eastern religions, tribal religions, Hinduism and Greco-Roman religions⁶.

2 Mays, J. L., Hosea, SCM (1969) 157.

3 Cf. Buttrick & Co. Ed. "Isaiah", in Interpreter's Bible, 5, N.Y. (1956) 473: "it is the intensity of His suffering love which distinguishes His self revelation to Israel from the loftiest contemporary religious thinking. Contrast the imperturbable tranquillity of the celestials in most faiths with this travailing God"

4 In spite of the masculine form "omen" used here, it must, in the context, have a feminine sense. Cf. Noth, op. cit. 87. The Jerusalem Bible translates this term as foster-father, which is not very felicitous!!

5 The Hebrew word "go'el" is translated as deliverer, protector, liberator, redeemer etc, and it derives its origin from the custom of levirate marriage (cf. Lev. 25:5-10).

6 In Near Eastern religions (Babylon, Canaan) we hear of Ishtar, Astarte etc. cf. Swidler, op. cit., 25. Among the tribals there is a strong belief in female

Israel and her God

One of the terms that is very often used in the O. T. to define the characteristics of God is, *rehemim* (plural)¹, which is translated "mercy" or "compassion" (cf. Ex. 33:19; Dt. 13:17-18; Is. 9:17, 14:1, 63:7-15; Pss. 77:9, 79:2, 119:77; Zech. 1:16 etc.). The root of this word is "reham" which means "womb" of a woman or a mother (cf. Gen. 20:13; 49:25; Hos. 9:14; Jer. 1:5) 20:17 etc.). Thus both the root and its derivatives have come to denote motherly feelings of gentleness, affection, tenderness, mercy, compassion, pity etc.

Two other terms that point out the feminine in God are *Hokmah* (cf. *sophia* in Greek and "Saraswati" in Hinduism) and *Shekinah* (presence) both of which are feminine nouns. While the former is pictured as divine-human spirit who informs all created realities (cf. Prov. 8:1-9:6, Wis. 6:12-9:18; Sir. 24 etc.), the latter appears as the earthly dwelling of the presence of God (cf. Dt. 12:11; 14:23, 16:2), which in the rabbinical literature is later employed as a substitute for the name of YHWH. The feminine in YHWH ("Shekinah") accompanies Israel in her exile, according to the rabbis, while the masculine turns away in anger!²

All these terms ("rehemim", "hokmah" and "shekinah") surely intend to convey the idea that Israel could not shy away from a natural human yearning to experience the feminine in God.

Israel's entrenchment in patriarchal mores could not permit her to have a female god, but, her being "Adam", human (male

words such as Daka, Pami, Naga, Eka, Dami, Dhand, Dewari etc. (cf. Eren, Jan., *A Treasury of the Garba* (mimeographed); Turkey, A., *Religion of the Uras* (mimeographed). The concept of "Arthanandawara" or the "Siva-Parvati combine" etc. is an offshoot of the belief in Hinduism. In the Greco-Roman pantheon examples such as Aphrodite, Venus, Diana and Aeneas etc. are to the point. In Roman Catholic Christianity Marian devotion perhaps supplies this need!!!

1 When speaking about God and Jesus Christ, the Gospels use the Greek term *spoudaiozesthai* which is a translation in Greek of the Hebrew "rehemim". It is interesting to note that in the whole of the N. T., this term is used only 3 times and that too to denote Jesus only (cf. Mt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34, Mk. 1:41, 8:34, 8:2, 9:22, Lk. 7:13), and 3 times, for God, in parables (cf. Mt. 18:27, Lk. 10:33, 15:20). No wonder a typically feminine quality is attributed to God as well as his Son Jesus.

2 The word "Shekinah" occurs mostly in the Rabbinic Literature, not in the Bible. Reuther, R. R., "The Female Nature of God: A Problem in contemporary Religious Life", in *Concilium* (March 1981) 61-66; Swidler, op.cit., 54, 55.

and female), will give her the ingenuity to enrobe her God with typically feminine characteristics and feminine metaphors!

The attribution of feminine metaphors to YHWH is neither limited to just one period in the history of Israel nor to just one class of writings in the O. T. The whole of the Hebrew TANAK⁹ bears witness to this. We shall examine each of the sections of the TANAK, namely the Torah or the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Writings or Wisdom books in order to arrive at the cumulative picture of the God of Israel portrayed as mother, woman, nurse, mistress etc.

God-mother in the Torah

One comes across four texts in the Pentateuch (Ex. 19:4; Num. 11:12; Dt. 32:11; Gen. 3:21), two of which (Ex. 19:4 and Dt. 32:11) depict God as a *mother-bird*, an eagle, the third (Num. 11:12) portrays Him as a *mother*, and the last (Gen. 3:21), as a *servant-mistress*.

While the figure of an eagle is commonly used to denote swiftness (cf. Dt. 28:49; Prov. 23:5; Job 9:26; Jer 4:13; 48:40; 49:22 etc.), in both Ex. 19:4 and Dt. 32:11 it is painted as a *mother-bird* brooding over her fledglings (Dt)¹⁰, and training them to independence and safety (Ex). The picture is that of the Lord bringing His people from the slavery of Egypt to the security and the freedom of Sinai. Israel is so certain that in His liberative gesture overflowing with maternal affection the Lord stirred up the nest, fluttered over the young; spreading out His wings, catching them bearing them on His pinions etc., that she makes YHWH Himself cry out: 'you have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself' (Ex. 19:4).

This picture, though quite evocative, is eclipsed by that of a *mother* and a *nurse*, as found in Num. 11:12. As complaints of

⁹ TANAK is the term used by the Jews to denote the whole of the Hebrew Bible (OT) as comprising of three major divisions, namely, the *Torah*, the *Nevi'im* (prophets) and the *Ketubim* (writings). The first letter of the first two divisions of this group is vocalized to sound TANAK.

¹⁰ The word translated "brood over" or "hover over" is used for "the Spirit of God brooding over and fertilizing the waters like a hen. Cf. Eph. Syr. i 117c-118A. Notice that besides Dt. 32:11, also in 32:13 we find a mother image in the phrase: "the Rock who bore you, and the God who gave you birth".

the people in the desert craving for the onions and the garlic of Egypt grow louder, Moses takes himself to prayer which is very daring. God has given him an unbearable burden. He has dealt ill with him (11.11), goes the complaint. 'Bold as this statement certainly is, it is surpassed by v. 12 by the assertion, cast in the form of a rhetorical question, that he, Moses, is, after all, not the people's mother, and is, therefore, not obliged to fulfil maternal duties towards them. Implicit in this is the very unusual idea that YHWH himself is Israel's mother'.¹¹ The implication projected is that it is God and not Moses who caused the Exodus, and hence He must carry Israel His child and nurse her too.¹² Thus in v. 12 the image of the mother is altered to that of a nurse charged by that mother with the care of the child. God is thus both a loving mother and a caring nurse!

Certainly a female preserve in ancient society, the task of a seamstress (cf. Prov 31.10-31) is attributed to God in the very first Book of the Bible (Gen. 3.21), which too is a pointer in the same direction of describing God in feminine imagery.

Now, as we pass on from the Torah to the prophetic literature, we are astounded at the way the prophets, especially Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah make use of feminine metaphors to highlight God's tender love towards His people Israel.

God-mother in the prophetic literature

Earlier in time than Jeremiah (c. 825) and Deutero-Isaiah (c. 550), Hosea (c. 750) describes in an allegoric form in chs. 1-3 God's love for Israel as conjugal and passes on to paraclitic 11, as maternal/paternal (cf. 11.3-4, 8-9).

YHWH plays the role of an educator to infant Israel (Hos. 11.3). Although Dt. 8.5-8 speaks of a man (father) instructing his child, yet the female metaphor (of a mother) seems more apt in the context of education of the little one. We may hence think of YHWH as a school-mistress or a mother or a nurse training the infant Israel in the alphabets of covenantal response and obligations. YHWH will not treat Israel as Admah and Zebulun, two of the five towns of the Pentapolis, which, because of their wickedness were destroyed like the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19.24-25) but will deal with them according to His holiness in terms of

11. Noth, M., *op. cit.*, 88.

12. Buttrick & Co. Ed., *op. cit.*, 198, Swider, *op. cit.*, 36.

"compassion and tender emotion which parents feel towards the helpless child"¹³.

The expression "my heart recoils within me" (11:8) may refer to the pangs of child-birth (cf. I Sam. 4:19), which also supports the idea of a "teacher-mother". Besides, the term "nihu-mim" (11:8) translated as "fever" in J.B., is close in meaning to "rehemim", and hence, the mother figure is all the more appropriate¹⁴. YHWH as a compassionate mother and committed instructress or nurse is what Hosea is highlighting in this section.

In *Jeremiah* 30-33 which is called "The Book of Consolation" the Hosean idea is continued, especially in Jer. 31:20. The Hosea traditions and the "Book of Consolation" belong together at this point, and in order to express the intimacy of YHWH's feelings for the people, feminine metaphors are freely employed. The community as mother (vv. 15-16) becomes the people as son and YHWH as *mother* (vv. 18-20), and the bitter weeping of the bereaved mother is transformed by the 'uterine' love of YHWH. The different units of this passage contribute a variety of images to the development of this metaphoric statement about the community's future as the child of the powerful and possessive mother deity, and that the compulsive love of YHWH will guarantee the safety of Israel. The rhetoric of the poem is "replete with female semantics", and should be appreciated as such¹⁵.

God's undying love for Ephraim and His emotional involvement with the community are expressed in the phrase "my heart yearns for him", which literally reads "my bowels rumble for him"; the imagery describes "the stomach being churned up with a persistent longing", a way of explaining the physical effects of a human emotion, which is the same then, as now¹⁶.

What is to be underscored here is that the imagery is overwhelming with maternal overtones. "The visceral feelings referred

13 Mays, J.L., *Hosea*, SCM (1969) 157.

14 Notice the translations "compassion" in RSV, "love" in GNB and "pity" in NAB which seem more right than "fever" in JB.

15 Carrol, R. P., *Jeremiah*, SCM (1986) 600, where he also cites from Tribble, P., *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality, Overtures to Biblical Theology*, 2, Fortress (1978). Swidler, op. cit., 31, speaks of the "doubly uterine words" used here which means "motherly womb-love".

16 Thompson, J. A., *The Book of Jeremiah*, Michigan (1980) 575.

to describe the physically powerful urges a mother feels for her son or lovers for each other".¹⁷ YHWH's love for Ephraim is so strong and so visceral, that He assuages the bitter feelings of the community "by the erotic-maternal urgings of the deity as mother" (cf. 31:15)¹⁸.

For Mother-YHWH, Ephraim is not only precious, but he is Her absolute delight. Every time She thinks of him "Her innards heave with maternal feelings" so much so She cannot speak of him except with Her insides mourning for him.

This passage reaches its climax in 31:22 which reads, "the Lord has created a new thing on the earth; a woman protects (lit. "tesobeb" means "surrounding") a man". The woman enclosing the man is YHWH Himself. In His womb YHWH nourishes, sustains and redeems Israel.

Whatever terms we may use, feminine love, uterine love, visceral love, maternal love etc, Jeremiah overwhelms us with the powerful image that YHWH is a mother and He will remain so to all His distraught children.

It is Deutero-Isaiah who surpasses all in the use of the mother-image to portray the feminine in YHWH.

YHWH is like a *woman in labour pains* (42:14). His emotions are convulsive. He shrieks, groans, pants and gasps like a woman who has long been pregnant and is about to deliver. The picture depicts the passion and the ardent love of God for His people²⁰, so much so YHWH the strong and powerful warrior of v. 13 becomes now (in v. 14) the mother in birth pangs with a passionate love.

One of the most striking expressions of divine love occurs in Is. 49:15 and 66:12-13, where the picture painted is that of a baby sucking at his/her *mother's breast*. "This is one of the strongest, if not the strongest expression of God's love in the O. T."²¹ and the Bible's most cherished way of portraying God's graceful love to human beings, which reaches here the acme of

17 Carrol, op. cit., 597.

18 Carrol, op. cit., 598.

19 Carrol, op. cit., 598-600; Swidler op. cit., 32; Trible, op. cit., 50

20 Young, E. J., *The Book of Isaiah*, III, Eerdmans (1972) 129.

21 Young, op. cit., 284-285.

tenderness. In this superb portrayal God's unforgetting and, at the same time, vigorous affection reaches one of the loftiest levels in all Scriptures. "This is the first time in the O.T. that witness borne to YHWH breaks through the reserve which elsewhere it observes so strictly and associates feminine predilections with Him. This lends all the greater conviction to what is here said of the passionateness of God's love for those who in sorrow and with humility wait for his salvation."²²

The image in 49:15 is intended to serve as a climax. The love of mothers has no bounds. But even this has certain limits beyond which it cannot go. This implied impossibility is shown to become a reality in the case of God. Not merely God will not forget, but He cannot forget the child of His womb!²³

In the picture of 49:15 portrays the deepest attention and affection of the mother, the image in 66:12,13 emphasizes the perseverance of this affection lasting from Israel's babyhood up to old age. Thus the mother's love for her offspring remains firm throughout life and forms a natural comparison for continued divine comfort²⁴.

Two other texts of Isaiah (46:3-4 and 63:9) present YHWH as a mother who carries Judah in Her womb (cf. also 66:12). The idols of the Gentiles have been carried on beasts of burden (46:1-2). But the people of Judah have been carried by God Himself, and this even before the beginning of their existence and all through the course of their life. The fivefold emphatic "I" of YHWH (in Hebrew) and the fivefold verbs (46:4) build up an unvalued climax, underscoring the insertion of YHWH into the whole life of Judah. This involvement of YHWH is something very intimate since He identifies Himself with them also in their suffering (63:9). YHWH becomes a "sympathetic" God, unlike the Greco-Roman deities who are considered "apathetic."²⁵

Further, the two metaphors underlying the term "carrying" also add to the richness of this imagery. YHWH carries Judah as the eagle carries her young ones on her wings (cf. Is. 40:31); besides, He carries Judah as a shepherd carries the lamb on his arms (Is. 40:11). Thus Judah for God is not a load or a burden which is borne with reluctance, but a treasure carried with love.

22. Westermann, *loc. cit.* 40-66, SCM, (1968) 420.

23. Young, *op. cit.*, 526-527.

All the three prophets have been forthright in their presentation of YHWH through feminine metaphors and with maternal attributes, that the ideological bias of any patriarchal society must stop to ponder over the paternalistic patronizing of a Father-God!!

God-mother in the writings (Wisdom Books)

We could first look at the Psalms since feminine imagery as applied to YHWH is found in quite a few of them, and since they form "the compendium and summa of the whole O. T." (R. Bellarmine), and "a Bible in miniature" (Luther).

YHWH is not considered as a casual acquaintance to Israel to offer her some perfunctory help, but a dutiful *midwife* who took her from the womb and laid her on her mother's lap (Ps 22:9-10). From the very moment of her birth she had relied on YHWH's intimate female role and from the very startings of her life He has been the citadel of her faith. If through Isaiah (48:3) YHWH could affirm, "you have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb", through the Psalmist (22:9), Israel could acknowledge "thou art he who took me from the womb, thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's breasts".

Ps. 71:17 carries over the same picture of God as a good nurse who has taught Israel to trust in Him. For Israel God's "Heilsgeschichte" was one of life-long care of God for her, which is expressed here both as a statement of confidence and of unceasing praise (71:17-18).

Another feminine image used for YHWH is that of a *mistress*, who supplies the needs of Israel, food, clothing and other necessities of life, and to whom the maid-Israel can always look up with humble trust (Ps 123:2). YHWH not merely provides for Israel but teaches her as to what ought to be done and how. Hence, "as the eyes of the maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God", sings the Psalmist (123:2).

To portray the idea that God's love begins where man's love leaves off (cf. Is. 49:15), the Psalmist (in 27:10) presents a hypothetical case through which he shows that God's love transcends every human standard. Here in Ps. 27, God's love is

24 Kidner, D., *Psalms 1-72*, Tyndale (1977), 167.

25 Kidner, op. cit., 121.

painted in terms of a *parent's* (both father and mother) love. The implication is that His love is both fatherly and motherly. It would persist even beyond the breaking point of a parent's love! This is exactly what Is. 49:14-15 has told us (cf. earlier).

Finally, comes the picture of a *mother*, almost as a climax among the psalmic imagery. The image is that of a weaned child in the bosom of the mother²⁶, which is a symbol of contentment (Ps. 131:2). It describes "the supportive care that YHWH has given" (Dt. 1:31; Is. 46:3-4; Hos. 11:3)²⁷ so much so that the centre of gravity of the life of the psalmist has now shifted, resting no longer in himself but in God his mother²⁸. This brings about the peace of mind to the psalmist. "He has calmed and quieted his soul". Therefore he would not be "like an infant crying loudly for his mother's breast, but like a weaned child that quietly rests by his mother's side, happy in being with her"²⁹. And YHWH is such a mother!

Lastly there is in the Wisdom tradition (especially in Wisdom of Solomon 8:2-9; Prov. 8:23-31 etc.) an allusion to God as a female being which needs to be briefly touched upon here. Wisdom is called "a *daughter* of God through whom God mediates the work of creation, providential guidance, revelation and reconciliation to God"³⁰. This mediating person, the daughter of God, is called by Solomon his *bride*, of whom he says: "I loved her and sought after her from my youth, and desired to take her for my bride..." (Wis. 8:2).

The same idea of Wisdom as mediating creatrix is also found in Prov. 8:23-31, where she sings: "then I was beside him like an architect, I was his daily source of joy" (Prov. 8:31).

Behind this view of Wisdom as creatrix, mother, bride, instructress etc., we may detect the remnants of Isis or Astarte.

26 Children were weaned approximately at the age of three (cf. 2 Mac. 7:27).

27 Allen, L. C., Psalms 101-150, WBC Texas (1983) 189. Anderson, A. A. Psalms 73-150, Eerdmans (1981) 878.

28 Weiser, A., The Psalms, SCM ('62) 777.

29 Weiser, op.cit., 777.

30 Reuther, art. cit., 61; Swidler, op. cit., 36-49 presents a number of texts which portray the feminine dimension of God in "Holman" (Prov. 1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-9; 11:13; 8:1-36; 9:1,6; Job 28:12-28, Sir. 2:1-10, 24:1-10; Wisd. 7: 21-8:6; 9:1-4 etc.)

a goddess of the Near Eastern people : but more than that, I think, we are rightly in the line of unbroken continuity with the Torah and the Prophetic traditions! More texts from the Wisdom tradition (cf footnote 30) could be studied with profit. But we must stop!

Conclusion

This brief survey of the feminine imagery used in the O. T. is a sure testimony to the fact that Israel saw her God not only as a Father (Is. 63:16; 64:7), husband (Is. 54:5; 62:5), protector (Is. 41:14; 43:14), warrior (Ex. 15:3), king (Ps 98:6; 99:4) etc., but also as a mistress (Ps 123:2), a midwife and a nurse (Ps.22:9-10; 71:17; Is. 46:3-4; Hos. 11:3-4), a woman in travail (Is. 42:14; 46:3-4) and a mother (Num. 11:12; Jer. 31:20; Is 49:14-15; 63:9; 66:12-13; Hos 11:3-4 8-9; Ex. 19:4; Dt 32:11; Ps. 27:10; 131:2). Should we not then accept YHWH as the Mother and Father of our very being and acclaim Her/Him and pray to Her/Him as such?

Juliana of Norwich (c. 1342-1413) and before her, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) have rightly followed the trails of this great Biblical tradition which has been rightly or wrongly, suppressed and bypassed in the earlier traditions as well as our own. With Juliana, then, we could truly affirm, "As truly as God is our Father, so just as truly is He our MOTHER"³¹.

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31. *Revelations of Divine Love*, 64, Swidler ed. cit., 36-50; Conzelmann, H., "The Mother Tradition in the Future of our religious East, ed., J.M. Robinson, SCM (1971) 243, says "Wisdom's predecessor is the syncretistic goddess which is most widely known under the name of Isis". Swidler, in p. 36, "Hokmah is doubtless the Hebrew expression of the ancient of goddess that has been biblically canonized..."

32. *Anon., Entolled in Love, Daily Readings with Juliana of Norwich*, London (1986), 35, *Morgan, P., Juliana of Norwich*, London (1958); *Anon., Juliana of Norwich Revelations of Divine Love*, London (1914.).

The Ideal Wife (Prv 31:10-31)

Proverbs 31:10-31 "is an alphabetic song that gives us an insight into the position, esteem and recognition enjoyed by the wife of a respected man"¹. There is not the least exaggeration in saying that it is a glowing tribute paid by the poet to the ideal housewife, and it is an admirable synthesis of the abilities and achievements the people of Israel were wont to associate with the figure of the ideal materfamilias. We shall first describe the background of the poem, then analyse the text, and by way of conclusion cite some Indian parallels to it².

I. The Background

From the historical point of view Prv 31:10-31 is a short treatise drawn up by an anonymous sage for the instruction of young girls in Israel (yes, girls who may have been attending his school). To be able to understand its origin, we must know something about the training of girls in the ancient world.

Education of women, though not widespread, was common in antiquity, as may be gathered from the evidence furnished by biblical and extra-biblical sources. An economic text from Mari³

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- 1 G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, 1968) pp. 322-23.
 - 2 A. Barucq, *Le livre des Proverbes*. Sources Bibliques, Paris, 1969. B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos*. Handbuch zum Alten Testament. I. Reihe 16. 2nd ed., Tübingen, 1963. W. McKane, *Proverbs*. The Old Testament Library 4th impr.: London, 1985. O. Ploger, *Sprüche Salomos*. Biblischer Kommentar 17, Neukirchen, 1984. H. Ringgren, *Sprüche Salomos*. Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16/1. 3rd ed., Göttingen, 1980. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs Ecclesiastes*. The Anchor Bible 18. 7th impr., New York, 1979. C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*. The International Critical Commentary, repr., Edinburgh, 1977.
 - 3 A site on the Euphrates, and the capital of a kingdom that flourished in the eighteenth century, and was annexed by Hammurabi of Babylon (1728-1686). For details, cf. J. R. Kupper, *Les nomades en Mésopotamie aux temps des rois de Mari*. Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et des Lettres de l'Université de Liège 142. Paris, 1957. Id., *The Cambridge Ancient History*.

makes mention of *sinnishat* DUB-SAR, "women scribes"⁴, which means that in ancient Mesopotamia there were women who had mastered the complicated cuneiform script and were functioning as scribes at the royal chancellery, but this was of course something exceptional. The study of music was part of the training of girls: Shamshi-Addu I of Assyria (1748-16) who, through a palace coup, had brought about the overthrow and murder of Yahdun-Lim king of Mari, wanted the murdered ruler's daughters to be sent to his palace at Shubat-Enlil so that they might be instructed in music⁵. In one of his letters he speaks of two female singers⁶.

Special mention must be made here of Pudu-Heba, the wife of the Hittite emperor Hattushilish III (1282-50), who was a highly educated woman: she had her own personal seal and carried on a correspondence with her counterpart in Egypt, and, as far as the evidence now available goes, no other Hittite queen had done such a thing. The treaty concluded between Hattushilish and Raamses II of Egypt (1301-1234) included in the final section cordial exchange of messages between the queens of the two rulers⁷.

Palestine had its schools⁸, from among which must be singled out the one of Shechem, known to us from a letter of the

II/1. *The Middle East and the Aegean c. 1800-1380 B. C.* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1973) pp. 1-28.

4 J. Bottero, *Textes économiques et administratifs* (Archives Royales de Mari. Transcriptions et Traductions 7. Paris, 1957) p. 99 (text 206:11). Sumerian DUB-SAR means "scribe" (DUB, "tablet"; SAR, "to write"); Accadian *sinnishat* is the plural of *sinnishtu*, "woman, wife".

5 G. Dossin, *Studia Mariana* (Leiden, 1950) p. 60, n. 17. The Kings of Mari were Yaggid-Lim, Yahdun-Lim and Zimri-Lim (1716-1695) who was defeated by Hammurabi

6 Dossin, *Correspondence de Samsi-Adu et de ses fils* (Archives royales de Mari...1. Paris, 1950) pp. 38-39 (letter 8:33-37).

7 Cf. *The Cambridge Ancient History*. II/2. *The Middle East and the Aegean c. 1380-1200 B. C.* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1975) p. 260. Cf. too Luke, "The Queen of Sheba (1 Kg 10:1-13)", *Indian Theological Studies* 23 (1986) pp. 248-72 (pp. 258-59).

8 Ugarit, for example, had its school for the training of scribes; cf. C.F.A. Schaefer *The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra-Ugarit* (The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1936. London, 1938) pp. 34-35. The colophon to the Baal-Anath cycle of poems preserves the names of two scholars

fourteenth century B.C. written by someone (whose name survives only in part⁹) to a local chieftain who bears the Indo-Aryan name *Pé-ra-ash-she-na* (= *Virasena*)¹⁰. According to Albright, the writer was a lady who was instructing girls in music and dancing. She complains that for three years she has not been paid her salary¹¹. If this interpretation is correct, it will follow that in pre-Israelite Canaan there were schools meant for the training of girls.

The Israelites took over the Canaanite schools¹², and though it is not clear that girls were frequenting them, it is undeniable that they were taught music and dancing. Judges 21:21 records that the maidens of Shiloh came out of the city and danced in the vineyards, and Song 7:1 deals with the bride's dance¹³. On the occasion of victory celebrations women as a group went out to welcome the victors with songs, timbrels and dance (Ex 15:20-21;

attached to the school: "Written by Elimelek the Shabnite; dictated by Attani-Purlani, chief of priests". The scribe bears a good Semitic name which has its parallels in the OT, and the chief of priests, a Hurrian name.

- 9 That is, *Ba-ni-ti*; we reproduce here the opening lines:

<i>a-na Pé-ra-ash-she-na</i>	To Pirashena
<i>qi-bi-ma</i>	say
<i>um-ma Ba-ni-ti...</i>	thus Baniti...
<i>ish-tu shatti 3 KAM</i>	since three years

Cf. K. Jarosch, *Sichem. Eine archäologische und religionsgeschichtliche Studie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung von Jos 24* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 11. Freinurg, 1976) pp. 64-65.

- 10 There were Indo-Aryans domiciled in West Asia who even established a powerful kingdom in North Mesopotamia and also petty principalities in Syria-Palestine. Discussions in M. Mayrhofer, *Die Indo-Arier im alten Vorderasien*. Wiesbaden, 1966. Id., "Die Arier im Vorderasien - ein Mythos?" *Kleine Schriften* (ibid., 1979) pp. 48-71.

- 11 W. F. Albright, "A Teacher to a Man of Shechem about 1400 B. C.", *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 86 (1941) pp. 28-31

- 12 Details in H. J. Hermission, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 28. Neukirchen, 1968) pp. 113-36. B. Lang, "Schule und Unterricht im alten Israel", in M. Gilbert (ed.), *La sagesse de l'Ancien Testament* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 51. Louvain, 1979) pp. 186-201. A. Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israel*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 39. Freiburg, 1981. Luke "The Wisdom of Canaan", *The Living Word* 91 (1988) pp. 131-48. Cf. too F. Gioia, *Pedagogia ebraica delle origini all'età volgare*. Collana di cultura ebraica 10. Assisi, 1977.

- 13 M. H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (The Anchor Bible 7C. 5th print., New York, 1983) pp. 601-3.

Jdg 11:24, 1Sam 18:6-7); girls were no doubt instructed in these arts by their mothers.

Barzillai refers to the singing women¹⁴ who entertained the king when he was dining, and the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib (705-681) records in his inscription that he received from king Hezekiah of Judah male and female singers as tribute¹⁵. It is most likely that there were special schools where girls destined to serve at the court were given training in music, both vocal and instrumental.

There were in the ancient world women who used to write poetry. Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon of Accad¹⁶, who was appointed high-priestess of the moon-god of Ur, is said to have composed a lament in Sumerian over the misery that befell Ur; there is extant too a long prayer of adoration she addressed to the goddess Inanna of Ur¹⁷. The OT does not mention poetesses, but it does vouch for the fact that women were wont to improvise songs (1Sam 18:6-7)¹⁸.

We have so far been considering the humanistic aspect of women's education in antiquity, but much more important than it was the ethico-religious aspect, and Prv 31:10-31 is a treatise composed for the formation of young girls who will one day be wives and mothers¹⁹. The poem is unique, without any parallel

14 In Hebrew *shārôt*, plural of *shārāh*, feminine participle of *shār*, "to sing" (86 times). The ivory from Megiddo (circa 1350-1150), on which is carved the scene of a victory celebration, will shed light on Barzillai's words: a ruler is seated on his throne, and into his presence are led two nude prisoners; he is drinking from a bowl, and before him stands a woman who offers part of her head-shawl as a napkin, and who is followed by another woman playing a lyre of nine strings; she is doubtless a singing woman. Cf. J. B. Pritchard: *The Ancient Near East in Pictures relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1954) pp. 111 (no. 332), 288.

15 A. L. Oppenheim, in Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (2nd ed., Princeton, (1956) p. 288.

16 He was a Semite, and the first imperialist in history who created a highly centralized empire that lasted for two centuries (circa 2350-2150).

17 A. Falkenstein, "Enheduanna, die Tochter Sargons von Akkade", *Revue d'Assyriologie* 52 (1958) pp. 129-30. S. N. Kramer, in Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East. Supplementary Texts and Pictures relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1968) pp. 579-82.

18 S. Gevirtz, "The Women's Eulogy of Saul and David", *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* (The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 32. Chicago, 1963) pp. 15-24.

19 M. B. Crook, "The Marriageable Maiden of Prov. 31:10-31", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13 (1954) pp. 137-40.

in the literatures of the biblical world, and the only text that shows some ideological affinity with it is the description of the ideal son found in the Ugaritic legend of Danel (2 Aqht 1:27-34); we cite it here, adding explanatory comments²⁰. The ideal son is one

Who sets up the stele of his ancestral god
in the sanctuary which enshrines his forefather.
who pours out his liquid offerings to the ground,
even to the dust wine after him.

The ideal son carries on the cult of his family's patron-god, and makes the customary libations.

Who eats his slice in the temple of Baal,
his portion in the temple of El.

He takes part in the funeral repasts held at the sanctuary on the anniversary of his father's death.

Who heaps up the platters of his company,
drives away those who would molest his night-guest.

He is a generous host, providing lavishly for his guests, and he also protects them from miscreants²¹.

Who holds his hand when he is drunk,
carries him when he is sated with wine.

He must safeguard his father's honour by supporting him when he is drunk, and even by carrying him on his back when he is boozed and is unable to walk.

Who plasters his roof when it is muddy,
washes his garment when it is dirty.

The houses in Syria-Palestine had terraced roofs which were plastered with mud²²; when the rains wash away the mud plaster, the ideal son will replaster the roof.

The passage we have analysed belongs to the literary genre known as *speculum*, "mirror, model, exemplar, example"²³, which

20 J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan. The Ras Shamra Texts and their Relevance to the Old Testament* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 5, 2nd ed., Leiden 1965) pp. 109-11, 255-56. Cf. too H. L. Ginsberg, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 150. We wish to note here that the ideal son's duties are listed four times in the legend, a fact that is indicative of the importance of the catalogue. The text includes some problems which need not be mentioned here.

21 Perhaps Gen 19:4-5 and Jdg 19:22 may help us to understand the background of the statement here.

22 Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 110, n. 9.

23 The *speculum* was a favourite literary genre of the Middle Ages, and there

was widespread in the ancient Semitic world²⁴. If the Ugaritic text is the Canaanite *speculum* portraying the ideal son, Prv 31:10-31 is the Israelite *speculum* portraying the ideal wife, and it was drawn up for the instruction of girls.

In order to drive home their lesson, the sages were in the habit of bestowing lavish praise on the good wife: she is the crown of her husband (Prv 12:4); he who has a good wife has found a great treasure and wins God's favour (Prv 18:22); a prudent wife is a gift from God (Prv 19:14). They speak too of the foolish woman: a beautiful but senseless woman is like a gold ring in the swine's snout (Prv 11:22)²⁵; a quarrelsome wife is like the uninterrupted dripping of rain (Prv 19:13; 27:15); life in some inaccessible place is better than life with a contentious woman (Prv 21:9; 25:24).

Mention must finally be made of Sirach's account of the happiness experienced by the husband of a good woman (26:1-4)²⁶. It does not deal with the woman's manifold activities, so that it cannot be counted as a genuine parallel to Prv 31:10-31, but inasmuch as it is part of the teaching the author used to impart in his school, it can be said to confirm the position adopted here regarding the origin of the poem under consideration. Two expressions in Sirach deserve to be cited here: *'ishshih lōbīh*, "good wife"; *ēshet hayil*, "loyal wife" (RSV), which is inspired by Prv 31:10.

II. Analysis of the Text

Being an acrostic poem, Prv 31:10-31 does not attest a

were drawn up all sorts of works with the word forming part of the title (e.g. *Speculum Perfectionis*, "The Mirror of Perfection").

- 24 Quite common was the mirror of kings, i. e., portrayal of the life and conduct of the ideal ruler; specimens in Luke, *Israel before Yahweh. An Exposition of Selected Psalms* (Pontifical Institute Publications 32, Alwaye, 1978) pp. 151-52 (cf. too p. 234, n. 1).
- 25 Cf. Jesus' saying about not throwing pearls before swine (Mt 7:6); on the basis of Prv 11:22 the suggestion has been made to read *lā tarmon*, "do not adorn", instead of *lā tirmon*, "do not throw", and translate "Adorn not (the snout of) swine with pearls". Cf. G. Schwarz, "Und Jesus sprach", *Untersuchungen zur aramäischen Urgestalt der Worte Jesu* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament 118, 2nd ed., Stuttgart, 1987) pp. 236-44.
- 26 H. Lamparter, *Die Apokryphen* (2 vols, Die Botschaft des Alten Testament 25 Stuttgart, 1972) I, pp. 119-20.

clear structure²⁷, nor any sort of strophic arrangement²⁸, and, as it now stands, it serves as an antithesis to 31:3, the warning against women who can destroy kings²⁹. The passage develops the tradition in Israel that the wife is the husband's '*ēzer kenegdô*', "a help according to what is in front of him" (Gen 2:18), i.e., corresponding to him, equal and adequate to him; the wife is the husband's suitable partner, *alter ego*³⁰. Let us now pass on to the text.

The poem commences with a rhetorical query, the answer to which is an emphatic no:

A good wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels (v.10)

"A good wife": '*ēshet-ḥayil*', "mulier fortis"³¹, a woman of strength, ability, efficiency" (for the same phrase, cf. Prv 12:4; Ruth 3:11); virtue, moral worth, is involved here, but what is primary is the capacity to have things done to everybody's satisfaction. The word *ḥayil* (244 times)³² denotes physical strength, and hence expressions such as "hero(es) of strength, mighty man/men of valour" etc. (Jos 1:14; 6:2; 8:3), '*ēshet*' is the genitive of '*ishshîh*' (775 times)³³, "woman, wife, female of animals". It is practically impossible to find the ideal wife: she is much rarer than jewels (pearls, corals).

The heart of her husband trusts in her,

and he will have no lack of gain (v.11)

"Gain": *shalal*, "prey, spoil, plunder, booty"; the word denotes spoils of war, such as silver and gold, garments, flocks, herds,

27 R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature. Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticle, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 13. Repr., Grand Rapids, 1983) p. 82 (structure).

28 Toy, *Proverbs*, pp. 542-43, divides the poem into eight stanzas, six of three distichs and two of two distichs; criticism in מנחם, *Proverbs*, pp. 665-66.

29 McKane, *op. cit.*, p. 409. Ploger, *Sprüche*, pp. 371, 374.

30 Luke, *Genesis 1-3. An Exposition* (Pontifical Institute Publications 34, Alwaye, 1980) pp. 88-89.

31 Thus the Vulgate; the Septuagint has *gune andreia*, "virile woman", and the Peshitta '*attetā' kashshirtā*', "industrious woman".

32 Compare the cognate Ethiopic *xayala*, "to be strong", *xayyala*, "to make strong", and *xayl*, "strength, power, army, troops".

33 Compare Accadian *ashshatu*, Aramaic '*intetā' l'ittetā*', Ethiopic '*anest*, etc.; the word is probably a primary noun, and so has no etymology.

and even women. The sage uses this term in order to emphasize the fact that the efficient wife by her industry brings in enormous riches in the form of profit. The Septuagint makes the valiant woman the subject of v. 11b, and the suggestion has been made to equate the Hebrew word with Arabic *thalla*, "wool", the rendering in this case will be "Wool is not lacking to her", and in support of it is cited the Arabic proverb "A clever woman is never without wool"³⁴. Another suggestion is to link *shālil* with Arabic *salil*, "offspring", and translate "He will not be lacking in offspring"³⁵, but this is unlikely, for the poem never refers to fertility.

She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life (v.12)

The good wife is the antithesis of the foolish wife who will always be doing harm to her husband.

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands (v. 13)

She procures wool and flax which she converts into manufactured goods. "Willing": *bēhēper*, literally, "in pleasure" (in the context, "with the pleasure of her hands"), which is certainly odd. The rendering "in the business of her hand" is perhaps most meaningful. An interesting suggestion is to take "her hands" as subject and render "And her hand makes them into a work of beauty"³⁶, the whole thing is improbable, especially since it demands two different subjects in the same verse.

She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from afar (v.14)

As ships bring wares from afar, so the valiant woman procures food grains from afar, and is not content with what is locally

34 To understand the correspondence so far as to be borne in mind that Proto-Semitic *th* becomes in Hebrew *sh*, e.g. Arabic *thawra* "bull" = Hebrew *shor* or Accadian *shāru*, etc.

35 References in McKane, *op.cit.*, p. 666.

36 The New English Bible has, "And she does the work of beauty", cf. McKane, *op.cit.*, pp.666-67.

37 F. Brown et alii, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (repr., Oxford, 1962) p. 343. The process of development may thus be indicated: pleasure that in which one takes pleasure concerns, affair, business. This sense is well attested in rabbinic Hebrew, cf. M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targum, the Talmud, Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature* (2 vols., repr., New York, 1950) I, p. 412 (two examples).

38 References in McKane, *op. cit.*, p.667.

available. Another way of understanding the text is that she, like the merchant who sends his ship with costly wares to foreign countries, sells them and amasses wealth, sells her products to distant lands and multiplies wealth; with the money she has gathered by her industry, she procures her food³⁹.

She rises while it is yet night,

and provides food for her household (v.15)

The second line is difficult, for the Hebrew word translated food, *terep*, literally means "prey", and so it has been emended to *terah*⁴⁰, "work, duties"; the sense in this case is that she, rising early in the morning, assigns the day's duties to the members of the household. However, such a change is unnecessary, since prey may be understood as food; compare, "Bring the full tithes... that there may be prey (= food) in my house" (Mal 3:10); "He provides prey (= food) for those who fear him" (Ps 111:5)⁴¹. The verse includes a third line, "and tasks for her maidens", which is apparently a gloss on the second⁴².

She considers a field and buys it;

with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard (v.16)

"With the fruit of her hands" means "with the profit she has made through her labour"; with the capital thus obtained she is able to plant a vineyard.

She girds her loins with strength

and makes her arms strong (v. 17)

The woman's enormous capacity for work is metaphorically described: she girds her loins with strength. "To gird", *hāgar* (with loins as object) means to get ready to do something; e.g. to set out on a journey (Ex 12:11). "Strength", *ōz*, an eminently poetic term (44 times in the Psalter), used here in the sense of efficiency, skill and the like. She makes her arm strong for activities such as are described in the poem.

She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.

Her lamp does not go out at night (v. 18)

39 It is unlikely that the poet intends to say that the woman's husband is a farmer and that she does the work of selling what he produces and then buys food.

40 McKane, *op. cit.*, p. 668. Ploger, *op. cit.*, pp. 371. The word occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible (Dt 1:12; Is 1:14), and the verbal root once (Job 37:11).

41 Brown et alii, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

42 McKane, *op. cit.*, p. 668. Ploger, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

"Merchand se": *saḥar*, i.e., gain from traffic, cf. *śāḥr* "merchant" (v. 14), the active participle of *śāḥar*, "to go round, travel about". The woman, realizing that trading conditions are in her favour, works late in the night, making her calculations and devising her strategies, such is the sense of v. 18b.

She puts her hand to the distaff,

and her hands hold the spindle (v. 19)

In the ancient world it was the work of women to spin thread and weave cloth, and it was regarded as a disgrace for males to engage in this activity⁴³. There is an Egyptian model house of a weaver, where women prepare flax, spin and weave on a loom⁴⁴; the spinning and weaving scene occurs in a painting on the wall of a tomb at Beni Hasan⁴⁵; there is a stone relief from Sute, with a lady seated on a stool and holding a spindle and wool⁴⁶.

She opens her hand to the poor,

and reaches out her hands to the needy (v. 20)

The kind-hearted housewife is most generous in helping the 'poor', and the '*ebyôn*', "needy"⁴⁷.

She is not afraid of snow for her household,

for all her household are clothed in scarlet (v. 21)

The lady provides winter clothing for her household. "Scarlet", *shānīm*, means expensive textiles dyed in purple, and in all likelihood the word includes a reference to the great industry in Canaan, viz. the manufacture of purple cloth with a dye made from the shell of murex, a variety of shellfish found on the coast, and the very name *Kenā'an*, "Canaan", means purple⁴⁸. Some change the

43 In the curse he pronounced on Joab who had treacherously murdered Abner, David said: "May the house of Joab never be without one who holds a spindle" (2 Sam 3.23), the sense is that the males of Joab's family will be doing the work of women, which is something shameful.

44 Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pp. 42 (no. 142), 288.

45 Pritchard, *op. cit.*, pp. 42 (no. 143), 288.

46 Pritchard, *op. cit.*, pp. 43 (no. 144), 288.

47 The two Hebrew substantives used here are part of the favourite vocabulary of the Psalms, and have a special meaning, but in v. 21 the sense is strictly the literal one, the materially poor, the needy ones, those who are in want. '*ânî*' conveys the nuance of passivity, whereas the cognate '*ānân*' is an active formation; '*ebyôn*' is a descriptive form, from the root '*ābah*', "to wish" (being in need).

48 Cuneiform documents attest the word *kinahu* (also *kinahhu*), "purple", which has become in the language of Canaan *Kenā'an*; the change of consonant *h* to *ayin* (= ') is a well-known phenomenon (e.g. *banu* = *ba'lu*,

vocalization of the word here explained and read *shenāyīm* "double", and understand it of the thick clothing for the winter season⁴⁹.

She makes herself coverings;

her clothing is fine linen and purple (v.22)

"Linen": *shēsh*, a word of Egyptian origin⁵⁰. "Purple": *'argīmān*, a term that is of Anatolian origin⁵¹. V. 22 continues the thought of the preceding verse.

Her husband is known in the gates,

when he sits among the elders of the land (v.23)

A respected leader, a prominent citizen, the ideal woman's husband takes his place with the elders⁵² of the city at the *she'irim*, "gates", plural of *sha'ar* (373 times). By this term is meant the open space inside the gate which served as the market (2 Kg 7: 1.18), the place of the common well (2 Sam 23:15-16) etc., and where the king (2 Sam 18:24; 19:9), the judges (Am 5:12.15) and the elders (Dt 21:19; 22:15) used to hold their sessions⁵³.

She makes linen garments and sells them;

she delivers girdles to the merchant (v.24)

"Linen garments": *sadīn* (cf. too Jdg 14:12-13; Is 3:23), a modi-

Hebrew *ba'al*, "lord, Baal"). When the Greeks became acquainted with Canaan, they called it *Phoinike*, "purple" (whence Latin *Phoenicia*). Exhaustive discussions in R. de Vaux, "Le pays de Canaan", *Essays in Memory of E. A. Speiser* (American Oriental Series 53. New Haven, 1968) pp. 23-30.

- 49 Compare the Vulgate (*duplicibus*) and the Septuagint (*dissas*); the New English Bible has "They are wrapped in two cloaks".
- 50 L. Koehler-W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (repr., Leiden, 1985) p. 1013 (Egyptian linen); the word is used of the special dress Joseph was given when he was appointed supervisor of Egypt (Gen 41:42).
- 51 Koehler-Baumgartner, *op. cit.*, p. 83. The word survives in Hittite *arkam(m)an-*, "tribute", in Accadian *argamannu*, "purple, tribute", and in Ugaritic *'rgmn*, "tribute". Perhaps from the fact that purple textiles used to be offered to kings, there arose the nuance tribute.
- 52 That is *zeqenīm*, plural of *zāqen*, "old man" (cf. *zāqān*, "gray beard"). As a technical term *zaqen* (circa 100 times) denotes a group of officials who functioned advisers to kings (1 Kg 12:6-8) and exercised some sort of authority (Ex 3:16-18; 12:21 etc.). Cf. G. Bettenzoli, "Gli 'anziani d'Israele", *Biblica* 64(1983) pp. 47-73; id., "Gli 'anziani' di Juda", *ibid.*, pp. 211-24.
- 53 The place was frequented also by gossip-mongers, slanderers and drunkards (Ps. 69:12).

fied form of Accadian *sadinnu*, "garment"⁵⁴. "Girdle" *agir*, i. e., well-decorated, artistic girdles, or perhaps the soldier's belt (1 Sam 18:4; 2 Sam 18:11, 20:5, 2 Kg 3:21)⁵⁵. "Merchant" *kina'ani* (cf Zch 14:21), from *kina'an*, "merchant" (Ez 16:29, 17:4, Zph 1:11), this special meaning accrued to the term because the Canaanites (the Phoenicians) were the greatest maritime traders of antiquity⁵⁶. The ideal wife is, then, a shrewd business woman.

Strength and dignity are her clothing,

and she laughs at the time to come (v. 25).

The first line has to do with the economic security enjoyed by the woman's household, as a consequence of which she has nothing to fear in times of need and adversity; she can therefore laugh at the uncertainties of the future.

She opens her mouth with wisdom,

and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue (v. 26).

"Wisdom" *hokmāh*, a well-known term which here signifies the teaching or imparting of practical skill on the woman's part to her daughters, so that they, in their turn, become ideal housewives.

"Teaching of kindness" is a slavish rendering of *lirat leved*; what is meant is kind, patient, loving instruction, taking into account the eccentricities of the young. "On her tongue is kindly counsel" (the New American Bible) brings out the sense very well.

She looks well to the ways of her household,

and does not eat the bread of idleness (v. 27).

She is always alert and energetic supervising the affairs of the household, and she never spends her time in idleness. "The bread of idleness, *lepern 'a'it*", stands for unearned bread, compare

54 For the different suggestions suggested cf McKane *op. cit.*, p. 363.

55 There is too the feminine form *ladit* (2 Sam 18:11, 1 Kg 2:5, 2 Kg 3:21, Is 3:24), which signifies too the lion-dress (Gen 3:7).

56 Belts were being worn by warriors as well (and were no doubt professional soldiers), and experts speak of belt-wrestling in the physical world. Cf. C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature: A Comprehensive Translation of Poetic and Prose Texts* (Bollingen Foundation Series, 38, Rome, 1949) pp. 57, 134. Reproduction of two belt-wrestlers in action, in *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, pp. 68 (no. 219), 274.

57 G. Commaeu, *La civilisation phénicienne*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1957; C. Harter, *The Phoenicians*, London, 1962.

58 *Biblic Bhāṣyam* 4/4 (December 1978) dealt with biblical wisdom.

59 Brown et alii, *Dictionary*, pp. 333, 435, the present connotation is a racial judgement.

60 Compare the adjective *'āpel*, "lazy, sluggish", which occurs only in Proverbs

"bread of wickedness" (Prov. 4:17), "bread of deceit" (Prov. 20:17), "bread of lies" (Prov. 23:3) etc., i.e., bread gained by wickedness etc.

Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
"Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all" (vv. 28-29)

The verbal root underlying "call blessed" is *ashshir*, which is in all likelihood a denominative of *'ashrā*, "Oh the bliss of..." or, "How blest...": it is a spirited exclamation⁶¹. "Praises" goes back to *halāl*, a base well known to all (cf. Hallelu vāh = Allelu-rya⁶²).

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain.

but the woman who fears the Lord is to be praised (v. 30)
"Charm": *ḥēn*⁶³, pointing to female beauty, cf. *ishet her*, "a woman of charm, beauty" (Prov. 11:16) rather than "a gracious woman" (RSV). "Beauty": *yāpī*, a word that is used of the beauty of women: *yopyāh*, "her beauty" (Prov. 6:25; cf. Is. 3:24; Ps. 45:12; Est. 1:11). There is the adjective *yāpeh*, which too is used of women (2 Sam 13:1; Am. 8:13; Prov. 11:22). The second half of the verse stands in sharp contrast with the rest of the poem, where there was question exclusively of efficiency, and so it has

references in Koehler-Baumgartner, *op. cit.*, p. 727.

61 Luke, *Israel before Yahweh*, pp. 2-3. The Hebrew origin of *Sh 26* has '*ishshah tšbāh 'ashrā bārah*', "Oh the bliss of the husband of a good wife", or "How blest..."

62 Compare Accadian *alābešeru* "to shout exultingly", Arabic *halla* "to shout in festive joy", and Syriac *hallel*, "to praise, sing".

63 The root from which the term is derived, *ḥān*, means "to show favour or gracious", and accordingly *ḥen* means "grace, favour", and secondarily "elegance of form and appearance" graceful form/appearance". The Qumran document known as Genesis Apocryphon embodies an account of Sarah's charms (20:2-8) which deserves to be cited here. "...beautiful is the form of her face and how lovely and how fine is the hair of her head; how graceful in it are her eyes and what a desirable thing is her nose and all the blossom of her face...; how graceful is her breast and how beautiful is her white colour; her arms, how beautiful they are! Her hands, how perfect they are. How graceful are her palms, and how slender and fine are all the fingers of her hands; her legs, how beautiful they are, and what perfect thing thereof are her thighs! There are no virgins or brides... more beautiful than she, and above all women she excels in beauty and her beauty surpasses all of them". Cf. B. Jongling et alii, *Aramaic Texts from Qumran* (Semitic Study Series New Series 4, Leiden, 1976) pp. 93-95.

been classified as a gloss⁶⁴, but this is unjustified.

Give her of the fruit of her hand,

and let her works praise her in the gates (v. 31)

The valiant woman should be given credit for her achievements, and these must be publicly acknowledged by the people of her home town.

III. Indian Parallels

Plöger cites two parallels to Prov. 31:10-31, the first from Virgil's *Aeneid* VIII: 408-12⁶⁵, and the second from the Chinese translation of an Indian treatise on *dharma*⁶⁶. The fact is, the Epics, the *Purāṇas*, and the *Dharmatāstras* dwell at length on the ideal wife, her virtues, her activities at home etc. and call her *sahādharmacārī*-, "man's life-partner in the fulfilment of *dharma*"⁶⁷. We adduce here two passages from the thirteenth book of the *Mahābhārata*.

In the first passage the ideal woman describes her attitude towards her husband: "Never did I speak evil and rough words to my husband, nor forgot my duty to him... If my husband had been out on business, and now came back home, I put a seat for him, and waited on him attentively. If he did not approve of some food, or did not like a dish, whether it was something to eat or to drink, then I avoided all such. If in the household any duties had piled themselves up, then I rose early and had everything carried out, or did it myself. When my husband went away on any business, then I practised many luck-bringing things with the utmost care. When my husband was away on any business, I gave up black eye-salve, ointment, bathing, wreaths, ointments for the body, and ornaments. I never awoke my husband, when he was quietly sleeping, even if there was business calling; in this my heart grew joyful. I never wearied my husband with household matters. I always kept that secret which should be hidden, and the house was fair and clean" (chapter 123)⁶⁸.

64 Crook, "The Marriageable Maiden", p.137.

65 Plöger, *op.cit.*, pp.379-80.

66 Plöger, *op.cit.*, P. 380.

67 Another title is *pativratā*-, "devoted to her husband" (even to the extent of accompanying him to the funeral pyre), cf. Luke, "Widow-Burning", *The Living Word* 95 (1989) pp. 195-214 (pp.200-1).

68 J.J. Meyer, *Sexual Life in Ancient India. A Study in the Comparative History of Indian Culture* (repr., Delhi, 1971) pp.428-29.

In the second passage the good wife is spoken of in the third person: "The woman who shows her husband a bright and friendly countenance when he addresses her with harsh words or gives her angry looks, she is a faithful wife. The woman who waits on her poor, suffering, way-worn husband as on a son, is one gifted with virtue. The woman who, filled with deep heedfulness, busily astir, and skilled, with the blessing of sons, is dear to her husband, has her life in her husband, is one gifted with virtue" (chapter 146)⁶⁹.

The ideal woman has to rise early, make the house clean, spread cow-dung on the floor, 'give food to the Brahmans, the weak, the forlorn, the poor, perform religious duties, and so on. "This is holiness, this is asceticism, this is everlasting heaven, when a woman sees her highest good in her husband, is devoted to her husband with a religious zeal, and is good and chaste." (ibid.)⁷⁰.

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69 Meyer, *op.cit.*, p.429.

70 Meyer, *op.cit.*, p.430.

Women and Politics in Ancient Israel

In the biblical world there was nothing comparable to the *lex salica* that debarred women from becoming heads of state¹, and so we find, though only occasionally, energetic women assuming the reins of government in Egypt, Assyria, Arabia, Ethiopia, Israel and Judah. Queens, dowagers, queen-mothers and prophetesses had their say in the political affairs of their lands and some of them managed to put up their own candidates on the throne; women had, then, a prominent part to play in the politics of the ancient Orient. A brief survey, therefore, of this fascinating history will certainly be in place.

I. Women and Politics in the Non-Biblical World

We begin our discussions with Egypt which produced one of the greatest females of antiquity, Queen Hatshepsut (1501-1480 B. C.), who has been characterized as a "shrewd, ambitious and unscrupulous woman"², a characterization which is quite accurate. In her capacity as queen-dowager she became co-regent with Tuthmosis III (1502-1448 B. C.) who ascended the throne,

1 By Salic Law is meant the code of the Salian Franks and other Germanic tribes, and one of its provisions excluded females from succeeding to the throne; cf. H. F. W. D. Fischer, *Leges barbarorum*. I. *Pactus legis salicae*. Textus minores ad usum academicum 3. Leiden, 1948

2 W. C. Hayes, *The Cambridge Ancient History*. III/1. *The Middle East and the Aegean c. 1800-1380 B. C.* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1973) pp. 317-20, 329-33 (cf. p. 317). Cf. too E. Drioton-J. Vandier, *L'Egypte*, "Clio". Introduction aux études historiques. Les peuples de l'Orient Méditerranéen 2. 4th ed., Paris 1962. A. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*. Galaxy Books. Oxford, 1966. W. Helck, *Geschichte des alten Ägypten*. Handbuch der Orientalistik. I. Abt., I. Band, 3. Absch. Leiden, 1968. Scharff in A. Scharff-A. Moortgat, *Ägypten und Vorderasien im Altertum*. Weltgeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen. Munich, 1950. J. Yoyotte, *Die altorientalischen Reiche*. II. *Das Ende des zweiten Jahrtausends* (Fischer Weltgeschichte 3. Frankfurt, 1966) pp. 223-41.

while he was but a little boy³, and soon she had herself crowned as *king*. As the Pharaoh that she was, she assumed the throne name Makare, "the Truth is the Ka of Re"; her personal name means "the Highest of Noble Ladies"⁴.

Oracles of the gods were created with a view to justifying Hatshepsut's rule. In the temples she built at Deir el-Bahri there is the scene of her presentation to the gods by Amon, who, holding a young *prince*, confronts the assembly of the gods, and they on their part acknowledge her as his daughter: "This your daughter Hatshepsut shall live...We give her dominion over the lands... She is at the head of all the living... as *king* of Upper and Lower Egypt"⁵. When she visits the temples in the company of Amon her father, the gods acknowledge her: "Welcome, welcome. O daughter of Amon"⁶. The queen's coronation is thus described: "First month of the Inundation. New Year, the beginning of peaceful years, Day of the Coronation of the *King* of Upper and Lower Egypt. Union of the Two Lands..."⁷.

The temples of Deir el-Bahri contained her statues with masculine features; in the inscriptions she is referred to with the masculine forms of pronouns; she was even donning a beard! The queen was supported by most capable men, such as the Chief Steward Senenmut, his brother the Steward Senmen, the High Priest Hapuseneb, the Chancellor Nehesi and others. Hatshepsut died a natural death⁸, and soon her statues were destroyed, and her name erased from the monuments.

The queen was not interested in wars of expansion, so that her reign was quite peaceful, but she undertook a series of expeditions for self-aggrandizement⁹. She began maritime trade with Punt¹⁰, the incense-land, in order to procure myrrh and

3 After Hatshepsut's death he proved himself to be an able and energetic ruler, and even undertook expeditions to Palestine..

4 Scharff, *op. cit.*, p. 126

5 H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods. A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as Integration of Society and Nature* (6th impres., Chicago, 1969) p. 77

6 Frankfort, *op. cit.*, p. 105

7 Frankfort, *op. cit.*, p. 106

8 Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 318. Her mummy has not been preserved, and her dear daughter disappeared without a trace (Scharff, *op. cit.*, p. 128).

9 Hayes, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-33.

10 That is, the Somali coast; details in W. Helck-E. Otto, *Kleines Wörterbuch der Ägyptologie* (Wiesbaden, 1956) pp. 276-77.

frankincense and also myrrh trees for planting in the groves of Amon's temple, and even exotic items such as monkeys and baboons¹¹. Two expeditions were undertaken to the granite quarries near Aswan to cut out obelisks, expeditions were despatched to the turquoise mines in Sinai as well¹². All in all, Hatshepsut was a politically conscious woman who did her best to come up to the level of a domineering male.

We wish to mention here another Egyptian queen, Anchesenamon, the widow of the boy-Pharaoh Tutankhamon (1352-49 B.C.), who made an attempt to get a husband of her own choice. Had she succeeded in her endeavour, the whole history of Egypt would have taken a different course. The young widow wrote twice to the Hittite emperor Shuppiluliumash (1380-46 B.C.) to send to Egypt one of his sons so that she could have him as her husband; so he despatched to her his son Zannazaah, who was, however, murdered by the Egyptians either on the way or on reaching Egypt¹³. The emperor was very much distressed at the fate of his son¹⁴, and Anchesenamon was forced to marry an elderly man¹⁵.

Egyptian sources preserve the names of several queens who never had anything like the ambitions of Hatshepsut but were

- 11 These used to be kept as pets in Mesopotamia and Egypt and also to be offered as tribute and presents to rulers. 1 Kg 12.22 records that Darius's fleet brought him apes and baboons (not peacocks, a rendering for which there is no justification).
- 12 Copper and turquoise (i.e. Turkish stone, an oblique mineral, blue in colour, and used as a gem) were being mined from Wadi Maghara (Gebel el-Madina) (where there was a temple dedicated to Hathor, the lady of the turquoise-country), and Fadi el-Air, and inscriptions dating back to the Third Dynasty (2650-2600 B.C.) make mention of the mines (Harkness, *op.cit.*, p. 330-33).
- 13 H. G. Güterbock, "The Deeds of Suppiliuma at Tudohia and Murshili I," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 10 (1951), pp. 41-88, 75-98, 107-30. Cf. also Drioton-Vander, *op.cit.*, pp. 347-48. A. Goetze, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, III/2, *The Middle East and the Aegean c. 1380-1200 B.C.* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1975) p. 18.
- 14 He burst forth into a bitter lament, asking the gods why such a misfortune had befallen him. The man responsible for the murder was the general Haremhab, who ascended the throne after A's death (cf. the following note).
- 15 Namely, Ai, who was an official under the notorious ruler Akhenaton, the marriage was arranged by Haremhab, who knew that he had nothing to fear from the old man, and bided his time to seize the throne (Drioton-Vander, *op.cit.*, p. 349).

content with their life in the harem. According to a legend the last ruler of the Sixth Dynasty (circa 2350-2190 B.C.) was queen Nitocris who erected the third pyramid at Giza¹⁶. It is an historical fact that the last ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty (circa 2052-1778 B.C.) was a queen, viz. Sobknefert, who was probably the daughter of Ammenemes III (1840-1792 B.C.) and sister or half-sister of his successor Ammenemes IV; she survived the latter on the throne by about four years, and her reign was presumably due to the absence of male heirs to the throne¹⁷.

Among the Hittites the queen mother was known by the title Tawanannash¹⁸, and occupied a special place of honour, so much so that as long as she was alive the reigning monarch's wife used to be designated as the king's wife. The widow of Shuppiluliumash who was a Babylonian by origin, was a most imperious woman, caused lot of trouble to Murshilish II (1345-15 B.C.) and even interfered with the working of the government; she was accused of various offences, especially of having caused by black magic the death of the ruler's wife, and so she was expelled from the palace. The old woman died of a broken heart, and later generations were so shocked by the event that they attributed the misfortunes that befell the royal house to the cruelty meted out to the Tawanannash¹⁹.

A politically conscious Hittite queen was Pudu-Heba, the wife of Hattushilish III (1282-50 B.C.)²⁰, who had her own seal and carried on a correspondence with her counterpart in Egypt. As far as the evidence now available goes, no other queen in Anatolia had done such a thing. The final section of the treaty

16 W.S. Smith, *The Cambridge Ancient History*. II/2, *Early History of the Middle East* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1971) pp. 179, 196-97.

17 Hayes, *op.cit.* pp.42-43.

18 F.Cornelius, *Geschichte der Hethiter*. Darmstadt, 1979. Goetze, *Kleinasien*. Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft III/1. 2nd ed., Munich, 1957. O.R.Gurney *The Hittites*. Pelican Books. Repr., Baltimore, 1966. A monograph the writer has not been able to consult is S.R. Bin-Nun, *The Tawananna in the Hittite Kingdom*. Texte der Hethiter 5. Heidelberg, 1975 (rev. thesis).

19 Gurney, *op.cit.*, pp.66-67. As Goetze, *op.cit.*, p.126, notes, "The affair had political overtones".

20 The queen bears a good Hurrian name, Heba (also Hepa) being the great goddess of the Hurrians; compare Gilu-Heba, Dadu-Heba, Shuwar-Heba, and Shatu-Heba. Details in G.Wilhelm, *Grundzüge der Geschichte und Kultur der Hurriter*. Grundzuge 48. Darmstadt, 1982.

concluded between Hattushilish and Raamses II of Egypt (1301-1234 B.C.) included a cordial exchange of greetings between the queens of the two rulers²¹.

We now come to the court of Assyria where women used to play quite a significant rôle. Shamshi-Adad V (823-10 B.C.) had married the Babylonian princess Sammu-ramat, a very able woman who acted as regent when Adad-nirari III (809-782 B.C.), who was a minor, ascended the throne. The queen-mother had a memorial stele at Asshur along with those of rulers and high officials, and she is mentioned together with the king in a dedication inscription (which is something exceptional for a woman). Sammu-ramat seems to have promoted the cult of the Babylonian god Nabu, and on a statue of his is the inscription, "Trust in Nabu, and trust in no other god"²².

The fame of Sammu-ramat in the ancient world was such that the Greeks converted her into the mythical heroine Semiramis²³, the daughter of the goddess Derketo and a woman of great beauty, she was the wife of king Ninus²⁴, and after the death of her husband reigned all alone over Babylonia. She constructed magnificent buildings²⁵, conducted expeditions to Bactria and India, and survived an attempt by her son to topple her, she finally gave up the throne and was taken up to the gods.

Another Assyrian queen who created history was Nargisi²⁶, the favourite wife of Sennacherib (704-687 B.C.); she was an

21 Goetze, *op.cit.*, p.260.

22 S. Smith, *The Cambridge Ancient History. VI. The Assyrian Empire* (ed. Cambridge, 1965) pp.27,81. Cf. too H.W.F. Saggs, *The Greatness that was Babylon* (Mentor Books, New York, 1968) p.113.

23 Moortgat, *op.cit.*, p.406.

24 W. Roling, *Der Kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike* (5 vols. D.T. ed., Munich 1979) V, cols. 94-95.

25 The name is a modification of Nineveh; on the legend, cf. D.O. Edzard, *Der Kleine Pauly* IV, cols. 133-34.

26 According to Herodotus (I:185) Semiramis "was responsible for certain remarkable embankments in the plain outside the city, built to control the river that used to flood the whole countryside" (A.de Selincourt, *Herodotus: The Histories* (Penguin Classics Repr., Harmondsworth, 1977, p.115); he mentions too Nitocris who was of greater intelligence than Semiramis and was the wife of Labynetos, = Nabonidus). The Greek historian is confused, and the information he furnishes is legendary; cf. Roling, *Der Kleine Pauly* IV, col. 141.

27 Smith, *op.cit.*, pp.69,79,81.

Aramean or Phoenician by race and Sennacherib's marriage to an alien caused his estrangement from his father. Naqia prevailed upon her husband to set aside his lawful heirs and appoint her son Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.) as crown-prince and this aroused the ire of the elder sons who went to the extent of murdering their father²⁸.

When Esarhaddon became sick Naqia (who was an old woman by that time) entered the scene and saw to it that the younger son Assurbanipal (668-26 B.C.) destined for the priesthood²⁹ was appointed crown-prince in the place of the elder son Shamash-shum-ukin; the choice was said to be made on the orders of the gods Asshur and Enlil! The lawful heir was made crown-prince of Babylon and later on when he rose in revolt, he was crushed with an iron hand. By her action Naqia won the unending gratitude of Assurbanipal.

Special mention must be made of South Arabia where women regularly functioned as heads of state and it has even been conjectured that in the royal family there was prevalent the matrilineal system³⁰. To the credit of the pagan Arabs it must be said that on the whole the position of women among them was very high and their influence truly great³¹. They were free to choose their husbands and even had the right to divorce them; they could if ill-treated, return home, but they were also faithful and devoted to their husbands. They accompanied the male folk on military expeditions, wielded the sword, and defended those who took shelter in their tents. Lastly women were also known for their skill in poetry³².

28. 2 Kgs 19:37 records how the emperor was killed by his sons Adrammelech and Shimelech as he was worshipping in the temple of Nisroch (= probably Nimrod) and that the paricides fled to Ararat (= Urtu) or Saggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-32.

29. Therefore he was instructed in the art of writing, and as emperor he created the great library at Nineveh which contained thousands of cuneiform tablets preserving earlier texts.

30. J. G. Gray, *1 & 2 Kings* (The Old Testament Library, London, 1963) p. 241. In antiquity there have in fact been matrilineal groups.

31. R. A. Nicholson, *A Concise History of the Arabs* (repr., Cambridge, 1969) pp. 87-88. Cf. too C. Hunt, *History of Arabic Literature* (repr., Delhi, 1990) pp. 10-32.

32. The sister of the poet Tarabata, Sharran, composed an elegy on him; the greatest of the poetesses was Khansa who flourished shortly before the rise of Islam (Nicholson, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-127),

There were five kingdoms in South Arabia, Saba, Hadramaut, Qataban, Main and Ausan, the most important being Saba (i.e., OT Sheba)³³. The earliest reference to the Arabs occurs in the documents from Assyria which speak of the Arubu and the Aribi, two forms resulting from the working of the law of vowel harmony. Most noteworthy is the fact that the texts preserve the names of some queens: Tiglath-Pileser III (745-27 B.C.) mentions Zabibe and Samsi, queens of Arabia³⁴, and Sargon II (721-705 B.C.), Samsi, queen of Arabia³⁵, but unfortunately we do not know anything about the career of these remarkable women³⁶.

1 Kg 10:1-13 deals with the queen of Sheba who came to Jerusalem with a large retinue, bringing along with her spices, gold and precious stones as present for Solomon³⁷, and all authorities are agreed that we have here a genuine historical record³⁸. As head of the state the queen undertakes a journey of some 1400 miles³⁹, and leads a caravan of camels⁴⁰, making on the way shrewd calculations as to how to wrest from Solomon rights and privileges in the matter of trade; we are justified in regarding her as a shrewd business-woman.

33 On the history and culture of South Arabia, cf. R.L.B. Bowen et alii, *Archaeological Discoveries in South Arabia*. Baltimore, 1958. G. W. van Beek, "South Arabian History and Archaeology", *The Bible and the Near East. Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (New York, 1961) pp.229-48. A. Grohmann, *Arabien*. Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft. III. Abt., I. Teil, III. Band, III. Lief., IV. Heft. Munich, 1963. F.M. Heichelheim, "Geschichte Arabiens vor dem Islam", *Orientalische Geschichte von Kyros bis Mohammed* (Handbuch der Orientalistik. I. Abt., II. Band, II. Absch., Lief. 4, Leiden, 1966) pp.280-360. H. von Wissmann, *Zur Archäologie und antiken Geographie von Südarabien. Haḍramaut, Qatabān und das Adengebiet in der Antike*. Publications de l'Institut Historique et Archeologique de Stamboul 24. Paris, 1968.

34 A.L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (2nd ed., Princeton, 1956) pp.283-84.

35 Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p.286.

36 N. Abbott, "Pre-Islamic Arab Queens", *American Journal of Semitic Literature* 58 (1941) pp.1-22.

37 Luke, "The Queen of Sheba", *Indian Theological Studies* 23 (1986) pp.248-72

38 Compare, for instance, E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*. II/2. *Der Orient vom zwölften bis zur Mitte des achten Jahrhunderts* (5th ed. Darmstadt, 1975) p.268 ("... etwas Geschichtliches...").

39 J.A. Montgomery-H.S. Gehman, *The Books of Kings* (The International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh, 1951) p.215.

40 On the domestication of the camel, cf. Luke, *op. cit.*, p. 252, n.17.

Women going on long-distance journeys was not unusual in antiquity. The ruler of the Mitanni kingdom in North Mesopotamia⁴¹, Artatama I, despatched his daughter to the harem of Tuthmosis IV (1425-1408 B.C.)⁴²; Shuttarna II gave one of his daughters in marriage to Amenophis III (1408-1372 B.C.), and the princess arrived at the Egyptian court with a retinue of 317 Mitannian girls⁴³; Tushratta sent his daughter to the harem of the same Pharaoh, after whose death she was transferred to that of his successor⁴⁴. The journey from the capital of the Mitanni kingdom to Egypt must have been a tedious one, but it was undertaken by female folk, of course, in the company of males, without the least hesitation.

The queen tested Solomon with 'hard questions', in Hebrew *hîdôt*, the plural of *hîdāh* "riddle"⁴⁵. To understand the biblical writer's statement, we must remember that in pagan Arabia there used to be fairs at which poets and orators entered into verbal contests; what athletics was to the Greeks, that the display of verbal skill was to the Arabs, and it is said that at Ukaz (where the fair lasted twenty days) the young man Muhammad listened spellbound to the eloquence of Quss ibn Saïda, bishop of Najran⁴⁶. No wonder, then, if the queen of Sheba made a spectacular show of her verbal skill⁴⁷.

Reference must finally be made to Acts 8:27 which mentions in passing "the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians"⁴⁸. By Ethiopia is meant not the modern country but the area of Sudan, and *hē Kandakē*, "the Candace", is a modification of the title *Katake*,

41 Mitanni is a political as well as geographic designation, denoting a kingdom where an Aryan minority managed to impose its rule on the Hurrian majority. For bibliographical references, cf. Luke, *op. cit.*, p.255, n. 26 (pp. 255-56); cf. too Wilhelm, *Grundzüge der Geschichte und Kultur der Hurriter* (n.20 above),

42 M.S. Drower, *The Cambridge Ancient History* II/1, p.463.

43 Drower, *op. cit.*, p.460.

44 Drower, *op. cit.*, pp. 487-88.

45 On the term, cf. Luke, *op.cit.*, p.263, n.51; for a concrete example, cf. Jdg 14:10-20

46 Nicholson, *op.cit.*, pp.135-36.

47 Specimens of verbal contests in Luke, *op.cit.*, pp.262-63.

48 F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Repr., Grand Rapids, 1984) p.186 (cf. too *ibid.*, n. 43) E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford,1982) p.310

"queen", which means the queen-regent⁴⁹. A one-eyed queen-regent of masculine character fought against the Romans in 21-20 B.C.⁵⁰, and, in addition to the Candace of Acts 8:27, the sources mention a third one who was a contemporary of Nero (A.D.54-68). It is certainly remarkable that there were women who dared to defy the might of imperial Rome.

In conclusion, there were women in the ancient world who took an active part in politics, made their impact felt on the government machinery, put on the throne their favourites, carried on international correspondence, undertook business trips, resisted imperialists. They were no doubt women who were completely liberated.

II. Women and Politics in Israel

Women did play an active part in the political life of the people of Israel, and the first to be singled out from among them is Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth and a prophetess, who used to sit under a palm tree and give judgment to those who came to her (Jdg 4:4-5)⁵¹. The woman's name means "bee", and since Lappidoth signifies "torches", it has been linked with Baraq (RSV Barak), "lightning", and the suggestion has been made that Barak is none other than the woman's husband Lappidot⁵²! Deborah "judged" Israel, a statement that can mean that she communicated divine oracles, but a better interpretation is that she was exercising judicial functions.

Deborah was a prophetess⁵³, i. e., an inspired person. The

49 W.F. Arndt-F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge, 1957) p. 403. Cf. too J.G.C Anderson, *The Cambridge Ancient History. X. The Augustan Empire 44 B.C.-A.D. 70* (repr., Cambridge, 1989) p.242, n.1.

50 On the Ethiopic wars, cf. Anderson, *op.cit.*, pp.241-43.

51 R.G. Boling, *Judges*. The Anchor Bible 6A. New York, 1975. G.F. Moore, *Judges*. The International Critical Commentary. Repr., Edinburgh, 1976. J.A. Soggin, *Judges*. The Old Testament Library. 2nd ed., London, 1987.

52 Thus Boling, *op.cit.*, p.95; the suggestion was made by ancient Jewish exegetes (Moore, *op.cit.*, p.113).

53 In Hebrew *nebi'ah*, the feminine of *nabi'* which, from the morphological point of view, is a passive participle of the Proto-Semitic root *naba'a*, "to call"; the sense therefore is 'vocatus' ('vocata'), namely, by God. Discussions in Luke, 'God's Call and the Concept of the 'Man of God' in Extra-Biblical Religions', *Vocation: God's Call and Man* (NVSC Research Series 1. Pune, 1975) pp.3-26 (pp.3-4).

Mari documents⁵⁴ make mention of women who communicate divine oracles, and who are called *mahhātu* (also *muhhātu*), and *āpiltu*, two titles that call for some explanation. The first term is the feminine of *mahhū* (*muhhū*), "ecstatic"⁵⁵, from the base *mahū*, "to be mad"⁵⁶, and for the ancients madness was some sort of possession by the gods. The second term too is feminine, the masculine form being *apilu*, probably, "respondent", which to all external appearances is the active participle of *āpalu*, "to respond"⁵⁷. The females who bear this name communicate oracles to notable persons.

Two more groups of "prophetesses" are mentioned by the Mesopotamian sources, the first being *rīgintu*, the feminine of *ragimu*, literally, "the howler, shouter"⁵⁸; the message she conveys is political, "You shall bear my kingship"⁵⁹. The other title, *qamatu*, is new, and though its etymology remains obscure, its meaning, (some sort of) "prophetess, inspired woman", is beyond doubt⁶⁰.

The oppressor of the Israelites was Sisera who commanded an army equipped with chariots⁶¹, and was therefore invincible

54 For the English version of the relevant documents, cf. W.L. Moran, *The Ancient Near East. Supplementary Texts and Pictures relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1969) pp. 623-26, 629-32. Id., "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy", *Biblica* 50 (1969) pp. 15-56. Convenient edition of the relevant documents in F. Ellmeier, *Prophetie in Mari und Israel*. Theologische und orientalische Studien 1 Herzberg 1968.

55 W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (3 vols., Wiesbaden, 1965-82) II, p. 582. The form *muhhū* goes back to *manhu'u*, and the pattern underlying in, *cuCCuCu*, denotes bodily defects and ailments. Cf. von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik* (Analecta Orientalia 33/47, 2nd ed., Rome, 1969) p. 62 (Section 55.22). The *muhhū* is, therefore, the mad man! Be it noted here that *manhu* represents *manhu'u*.

56 Von Soden, *op.cit.*, p. 586. The bizarre actions that accompanied ecstatic prophecy made the Israelites put the prophet on a par with *meshugga'*, "mad man", the passive participle of the intensive stem of *shāga'*, "to be mad"; discussions in Luke, "Prophecy in Israel and Arabia", *The Living Word* 92 (1986) pp. 83-109 (p. 86).

57 Moran, *op.cit.*, p. 625, n. 29.

58 Moran, *op.cit.*, p. 626, n. 38.

59 Moran, *op.cit.*, p. 626.

60 Moran, *op.cit.*, p. 632, n. 113.

61 The number of chariots Sisera is said to have had at his disposal, i.e., nine hundred, is highly inflated and is representative of Semitic hyperbole. Tuthmosis III claims to have captured 924 chariots (J.A. Wilson, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 237); the total number may not exceed a dozen or two (thus Soggin, *op.cit.*, p. 71).

(Jdg 4:2-3). The name Sisera is apparently of Illyrian origin⁶², which means that the man belonged to an Indo-European group domiciled in Palestine, i. e., the Philistines. 1 Sam 13:19-22 explicitly says that the Philistines jealously guarded from the Israelites the secret of smelting iron; it is therefore not anything unusual if one of the Philistine potentates created a chariot force and managed to subdue the Israelites.

Deborah, in the name of God, commanded Barak to march against Sisera, and the battle took place by the river Kishon (Jdg 4:4-16). It would seem that it rained at night (Jdg 5:4-21)⁶³, so that the chariots got stuck up in the mire, and Sisera was routed (Jdg 4:15); he subsequently met his death at the hands of the woman Jael (Jdg 4:17-22). In the person of Deborah we have therefore a woman who took an active part in the political life of the tribes of Israel.

The Kenites, the tribe to which Jael belonged, were on friendly terms with Sisera, which is the reason why he took refuge in her tent, but her action would suggest that the Kenites were allied with the Israelites as well⁶⁴. Once this is borne in mind, the glorification of Jael becomes understandable (Jdg 5: 24-27), and the atrocity she perpetrated can be seen in an altogether different light: it was part of the war strategies of antiquity which allowed the treacherous murder of the enemy. When need arose women could kill the foe: a woman of Thebez threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and smashed it (Jdg 9: 53)⁶⁵, and a wise woman of Abel of Beth-macah managed to have Sheba (who had revolted against David) decapitated and

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- 62 The element *-era* is a modification of Illyrian *-ero* which is well attested in names; ancient Illyricum corresponds to modern Albania and Yugoslavia, and the language spoken there is known from names. Cf. R. Grosse *Der Kluge Pauly* II, cols. 1369-70. M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (rev. ed., New York, 1960) p. 150 (cf. too *ibid.*, n. 2). Soggin, *op. cit.*, p. 63 (Luvian name).
- 63 "A cloudburst and flash flood (5:20-21) won the battle" (Boling, *op. cit.*, p. 96. Cf. too H. W. Hertzberg, *Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 9, 6th ed., Göttingen, 1983) p. 177.
- 64 Noth, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58, 77-78. Soggin, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.
- 65 An upper millstone in US museum weighs 27 pounds (Moore, *op. cit.*, 258), the woman must have been helped by someone (Boling, *op. cit.*, p. 162), but in any case the initiative came from her.

threw the head over the wall of the city (2 Sam 20:14-22)⁶⁶. Women were, then, functioning as soldiers, and this is political action in the strict sense.

Another prophetess whose advice had political implications, was Huldah, literally, "mole, weasel", who prompted king Josiah of Judah (640-609 B. C.) to undertake a religious reform on the basis of the Deuteronomic code (2 Kg 22:14-20)⁶⁷. At the time when the book of the law was found in the temple (2 Kg 22:8) and Josiah inaugurated the reform (i. e., 621 B. C.), Assyria was in its death throes⁶⁸, and, taking advantage of this situation, the king asserted political independence from Assyria and even extended his power over the northern kingdom which had been a province of the Assyrian empire (2 Kg 23:15-20). Huldah must be counted as a shrewd politically minded woman who had been bent on promoting the political independence of her country.

The prophetess Noadiah, after receiving bribes from Sanballat and Tobiah, prophesied against Nehemiah (Neh 6:14) with the intention of dissuading him from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. In the post-exilic age professional prophecy had fallen into disrepute (Zach 13:2-6)⁶⁹, and those who represented it let themselves be hired by unscrupulous politicians (Neh 6:12-13). Noadiah is the antithesis to Deborah and Huldah who were fierce nationalists.

What the Tawanannash was at the Hittite court, that the *gebirāh*, queen-mother was at the Israelite court⁷⁰. When she came

66 Interesting reflections on the woman's action in P.K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (The Anchor Bible 9. New York, 1984) p.431.

67 Noth, *op.cit.*, pp.272-78.

68 The decline of Assyria commenced soon after Assurbanipal's death, and it was hastened by the combined forces of the Neo-babylonians, the Medes and the Umman-manda (in all likelihood marauding hordes of the Scythians). Nineveh fell in 612 B.C. to the foes, and Asshur-uballit who set up a kingdom in Haran was routed in 610 B.C., and the attempt he made to recover his power proved to be a thorough failure (summary in Noth, *op.cit.*, pp.270-71).

69 W. Rudolph, *Ezra und Nehemia* (Handbuch zum Alten Testament. I. Reihe 20 Tübingen, 1949) p.139, suggests that there may have been prophets who, for religious reasons, opposed the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem; their anti-nationalistic stance made them the object of the hatred of the masses who even manhandled them.

70 H. Donner, "Art und Herkunft des Amtes der Königinmutter im Alten Testament", *Festschrift Johannes Friedrich* (Heidelberg, 1959) pp.105-45.

to him, the reigning monarch rose and bowed down to her, a throne was brought for her, and she sat at his right (1 Kg 2:19). Members of the royal family were wont to go to Israel "to visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen-mother" (2 Kg 10:13), and naturally too the queen-mother⁷¹. Jeremiah addressed his oracles to the king and the queen-mother (Jer 13:18), and when Jeconiah was deported to Babylon, the queen-mother was taken along with him (Jer 29:2).

Of king Asa of Judah (913-873 B.C.) it is said that he removed his mother Maacah from her position as queen-mother, "because she had an abominable image made for Asherah", and he moreover "cut down her image and burnt it at the brook Kidron" (1 Kg 15:13; 2 Chr. 15:16)⁷². "Abominable image": *mip-lešet*, a rare word derived from the verb *pīlaš*, "to shudder" (Job. 9:6)⁷³, and therefore signifying a thing to be shuddered at; the Vulgate has "simulacrum Priapi" (Priapus being the god of male procreative power), which may be counted as a right guess. Asherah at times denotes the sacred pole planted near the altar (Dt 7:5; 12:3; 16:21); and there is too the goddess Asherah⁷⁴, whose *pesel*, "graven image", was set up in the temple of Jerusalem (2 Kg 21:7)⁷⁵.

Maacah's putting up an object of cult can be construed as a political move involving the appropriation of power, for it was only rulers who could establish centres of cult: Gideon made an ephod⁷⁶ which he put up in his city (Jdg. 8:27), David transferred the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6), Solomon built the temple

71 That is, Jezebel. 1 Kg 11:26 mentions Zeruah, the widowed mother of Jeroboam, but nothing is said about her position as queen-mother, and the likelihood is that she never posed as queen-mother.

72 Gray, *op.cit.*, pp.317-18. Montgomery, *op.cit.*, pp.275, 280.

73 The verbal root is a hapax legomenon; for the forms, cf. L. Koehler-W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (repr., Leiden, '85) p.764.

74 For the inscriptional evidence, cf. A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qom et 1'Asherah de Yhwh", *Revue Biblique* 84 (1977) pp. 594-608. M.S. Smith, 'God Male and Female in the Old Testament: Yahweh and his Asherah', *Theological Studies* 48 (1987) pp.333-40.

75 The *pesel* is an idol cut from stone, carved from wood, fashioned from clay or, cast from metal (Koehler-Baumgartner, *op.cit.*, p.770); there is the idiomatic expression *pesel* and *massekāh*, "graven" and "molten image" (Dt 27:15; Jdg 17:3-4. 18:14. Nah 1:14).

76 The ephod is part of the priestly apparel (Koehler-Baumgartner, *op.cit.*, p.76) and therefore it has been conjectured that the cult object set up by Gideon,

of Jerusalem (1 Kg 6), and Jeroboam set up the golden calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kg 12:29). This tradition seems to suggest that Maacah had assumed some sort of political power, and began meddling in the affairs of the state, for which reason Asa deposed her.

The queens of Israel and Judah were a further group of women who had a say in matters political, and Jezebel, the wife of Ahab of Israel (869-50 B. C.), is well known to all readers of the Bible. Omri (876-69 B. C.) who had established a new dynasty in the northern kingdom, sought to maintain friendly relations with the Phoenician principalities which, at that time, were becoming prosperous centres of maritime trade and foci of political power. The Arameans in Syria were posing a serious threat to Israel, and friendship with the Phoenicians would stand him in good stead in the eventuality of a confrontation with the neighbours in the north⁷⁷. It was this political consideration that prompted Omri to make arrangements for his crown-prince Ahab to marry Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal⁷⁸ of Tyre (1 Kg 16:31). The marriage aroused the fury of the orthodox Yahwists headed by the prophet Elijah.

Jezebel had her Phoenician retinue, and for them Ahab erected in Samaria a temple dedicated to Baal (1 Kg 16:32), an action that infuriated the orthodox circles, who might even possibly have risen in revolt against the king. At any rate Jezebel slaughtered the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kg 18:13) and in retaliation Elijah massacred the prophets of Baal (1 Kg 18:40); the queen vowed vengeance, and Elijah fearing for his life, fled into the wilderness (1 Kg 19:2-3).

A terrible drought resulting from the failure of the customary rainfall was interpreted as God's punishment for the sin of idolatry⁷⁹. Ahab and Jezebel attributed the calamity to Elijah's

was an ornate priestly garb (Boling, *op.cit.*, p.160), but what is more probable is that it was an oracular idol (Moore, *op.cit.*, pp.232-33), or at least a statue (Soggin, *op.cit.*, p.160).

77 Noth, *op.cit.*, pp.241-42.

78 That is, Ethbaal of the Greek documents, the name is wrongly vocalized in the Hebrew Bible (Noth, *op.cit.*, p.242, n.1).

79 Classical sources mention a one-year drought during the reign of Ethbaal. The statement in 1Kg 18.1 that it lasted three years is based on the reckoning of the dry summer of previous normal year as the first year (Noth, *op.cit.*,

curse; hence the king's question to the prophet, "Is it you, the troubler of Israel?" (1 Kg 18:17).

The story of the murder of Naboth (1 Kg 21) deserves to be specially mentioned here, as it illustrates the power the queen wielded in Israel. Israelite law enjoined that ancestral property should remain forever with the family, and when Naboth, on the strength of law, refused to cede his vineyard, Ahab knew that he was within his rights⁸⁰. Jezebel who had no scruples about Israelite law, argued that everything belonged to the sovereign and so ordered the murder of Naboth; she was, in this instance, following the tradition of autocracy prevalent in the non-Israelite world.

It is likely that in the rear of Naboth's tragic end there was operative the belief in the efficacy of substitution: when a ruler is sick, a *shar puhî*, "substitute king"⁸¹, is put on the throne and is subsequently done to death, in order thus to ward off the threat to the sick monarch⁸². 1 Kg 21:4 explicitly says that Ahab "lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread"; he was therefore 'sick, and there is nothing out of the way if the Phoenician lady, in order to bring about the recovery of her husband, resorted to a technique whose efficacy, she felt, was most certain.

The autocratic and strong-headed queen met with a tragic end (2 Kg 9:30-37). When Jehu (842-15 B. C.) who had successfully engineered a coup against Jehoram (849-42 B.C.), was making his triumphal entry into Jezreel, Jezebel "painted her eyes, and adorned her head, and looked out of the window"⁸³. In a

p.242, n.4).

80 For the oriental background, cf. Gray, *op.cit.*, pp.389-90.

81 There is a vast literature on royal substitution, which cannot be cited here, but we shall adduce here one concrete case: when Irra-imitti (1810-1804 B.C.) was ruling in Isin, the gardener Enlil-bani was appointed substitute king, and when the ruler suddenly died, the substitute was installed in his place and reigned nearly a quarter of a century (Oppenheim, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p.267).

82 M.A. Beek, "Der Ersatzkönig als Erzählmotiv in der altisraelitischen Literatur", *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1966) pp.24-32.

83 In the Semitic world it was the usual thing for women to look through the window (Prov 7.6), and there are iconographic representations of it; cf. J.B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures relating to the Old Testa-*

tone of defiance she called Jehu by the name of an assassin who reigned but seven days, Zimri (1 Kg 16:8-12), and branded him as regicide. On Jehu's orders she was thrown down through the window of the upper floor, and died in the fall.

A daughter of Jezebel named Athaliah was given in marriage to Jehoram of Judah (849-42 B. C.), and to the couple was born Ahaziah who reigned but a year and died a premature death at the hands of Jehu (2 Kg 9:27-28). When she heard of her son's death, Athaliah staged a coup, seized power, and put to the sword "all the royal family", and exercised autocratic rule over the land (2 Kg 11:1-3)⁸⁴. Quite in keeping with her Phoenician background, she promoted the cult of Baal (2 Kg 12:8).

When Athaliah was slaughtering the members of the royal family, Ahaziah's sister Jehosheba took Joash the son of the deceased ruler and kept him hidden in a chamber, and later on he was shifted to the temple where he was brought up under the aegis of the priest Jehoiada⁸⁵. In the seventh year the priest led a revolt with the concurrence of the mercenaries⁸⁶, and had Joash crowned in the temple (2 Kg 11:4-12). Everything was planned so carefully and secretly that Athaliah was taken unawares, and was executed on the orders of Jehoiada (2 Kg 11:13-16).

The OT speaks only of two queens - Jezebel and Athaliah - who were women of exceptional vitality and energy, and who managed to acquire extreme notoriety. Possibly there were other queens too who played a leading part in the politics of their age, but the Bible is wholly silent about them. Dan. 5 mentions the queen who came to the banquet hall of king Belshazzar and told him about Daniel, the only man who would be able to read and explain the mysterious writing on the wall (vv. 10-12). Exegetes are of the view that the person the writer has in mind is the queen-mother, and not the king's wife⁸⁷.

ment (Princeton, 1954) pp.39 (no.131), 265.

84 Noth, *op. cit.*, pp.236-37. The queen must have had the support of powerful groups in Jerusalem (compare the case of Hatshepsut).

85 According to 2 Chr 22:11, the king's sister was the priest's wife, and this explains the latter's solicitude for the little prince.

86 The Hebrew text has *kārî*, which seems to be a variant of *kereti*, probably, "Cretans" (functioning as mercenaries), who formed David's body-guard (2 Sam 8:18; 15:18 etc.).

87 L.F. Hartmann-A.A.di Lella, *Daniel* (The Anchor Bible 23. New York, 1978)

There are two more women [who cannot be left out of consideration in a study of the part females played in the politics of Israel, queen Esther and Judith⁸⁸, who, let it be recalled, are ideal figures created by the imagination rather than historical personages. They are nonetheless significant: they tell us what the Israelites of the post-exilic age thought about political action from the part of women. We need not retell here the story of their spectacular exploits, for all are very well acquainted with it; we just add here a couple of general remarks that will help the reader to view the two heroines in the proper perspective.

There is an historical kernel in the book of Esther, namely, the deliverance of a Jewish community living somewhere in Persia from persecution, and the celebration of the feast of Purim to commemorate the deliverance⁸⁹. The Jews, being a minority, had to be on the guard against being absorbed by the pagan majority, and so they jealously kept to themselves, but this made them the object of the latter's hatred. Such, in short, is the background of Esther, and the book proves beyond doubt that the author and his contemporaries took it for granted that women could be active in the political sphere.

Still more significant is the figure of Judith who is none other than Jael *rediviva*, and shows herself far more courageous than the male members of the community who are thinking of capitulating to the enemy⁹⁰. The book of Judith was writtern in the Maccabean age, and Nebuchadnezzar who wanted to be regarded as god and worshipped (3:8) was Antiochus IV of Syria (175-64 B. C.), surnamed Epiphanes, "god manifest"; Holofernes is the Syrian general Nicanor, and the Assyrians are the Syrians. Through a clever political action Judith 'saves the Jews from tragedy; she is indeed the ideal woman-politician.

K. Luke

p.184. Montgomery, *Daniel* (The International Critical Commentary. Repr. Edinburgh, 1950) pp.257-58. N. Porteous *Daniel* (The Old Testament Library. 2nd ed., repr., London, 1985) pp.79-80.

88 R.van de Valle, "Two Valient Women", *Bible Bhashyam* 9(1983) pp.104-13.

89 Luke, *The TPI Companion to the Bible* (2 vols. Bangalore, 1987-88) I, pp.123-24.

90 Luke, *op. cit.*, pp.121-23. Id., "The Book of Judith", *Bible Bhashyam* 9 ('83) pp.17-37. Van de Valle, "The Book of Judith", *ibid.*12('86)pp.237-48.

Women in the Pauline Letters

Introduction

Some of our educated women's attitude today to Paul is negative, on account of a few texts, attributed to him in later letters¹. But this is a caricature of Paul's teaching.

Hardly anybody will be unaware of the attitude of women to women in Christian circles today, for instance, the use of sexist language by women, the way women in various social strata speak about the type of wives they should like to have for their sons, their behaviour and posture in worship and a whole complex of social behaviour at home accepted as normal by the majority of women. At the same time one could also note the social patterns of behaviour expected of men in the different spheres of life such as home, church, office, factory etc. The expectations as well as limitations that structures of life in society impose on men and women, though they are more or less inhibitive of human freedom, are tolerated except in a few cases, which because of caste, social status or prejudice are evidently inhuman and oppressive. This awareness will enable us, whether women or men, to read Paul with humble realism.

In the case of Paul, in particular, we should remember that his letters give but occasional glimpses of his thirty-year ministry. Certain issues that have emerged in the life of the community are taken up with much care while others are treated in a way that reflects the normal ethical instructions of the diverse cultures within which he lived. These are modified and enriched by the impact of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection on Christian moral life.

1 Probably Colossians and Ephesians were letters written by Paul's associates either before or after his death. The Pastorals were not written during Paul's life.

There is a series of texts relevant for our study²; on two occasions Paul addresses problems which explicitly deal with women's participation in the communities' religious life (1 Cor 11:2-16 and 14:34-35). I do not think that the family parenesis in Colossians and Ephesians is a carefully thought out response to problems affecting women as such or that Paul wrote them at all. The writer has coated cultural parenesis with Christian paint as we shall see³.

Paul's collaborators

To begin with, we shall examine the role Paul's women collaborators played in his churches, in his ministry or independently of it⁴. Writing on the role of women Ollrog says: "The role of women in the pauline mission is often undervalued. The lapidary formula 'Paul had only male associates' is wrong. Expressly Prisca is referred to as a collaborator (Rom 16:3). The expression in Phil 4:3 suggests that Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi were numbered among the collaborators of Paul"⁵. Having mentioned the fact that the churches assembled at women's houses [Prisca-Aquila (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19); Chloe (Cor 1:11); Apphia (Philem 2); Nymphia (Col 4:15) and may be Julia (Rom 16:15)] Ollrog indicates that women also featured in other ways, supporting Paul (Phoebe Rom 16:1-2), being like a mother to him (Rufus' mother Rom 16:13), risking life for him (Prisca-Aquila Rom 16:4) and sharing in the hard labour of ministry (Rom 16:6.12). He concludes: "These references clearly show that, despite 1 Cor 11:2-16; 2 Cor 14:33b-36 (if Pauline), in the mission work women played by no means only a subordinate role. It appears that they had in the busy common work in the house communities a special area of work"⁶.

2 Roman Ch.16; Phil 4:2-3; 1 Cor 1-11; 16:19; (Col 4:15); (Col 3:18-19; Eph 5:22-33); 1 Cor 14:34-35; Ch 7; 11:2-16; Gal 3:26-28

3 There are a number of significant studies on Paul and women. The more significant recent study is B.Byrne S.J., *Paul and The Christian Woman* St.Paul Publications (Australia), 1988. Other works are S.Heine, *Women and Early Christianity*, SCM, London 1987; D.R. MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1986 (unavailable to me); E. Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Crossroad, New York, 1983; G.W. Trompf, "On Attitudes toward Women in Paul and Paulinist Literature" CBQ 42 (1980) 196-215.

4 One of the fullest studies of this area of Paul's ministry is W. H. Ollrog, *Paulus und Seine Mitarbeiter*, Neukirchener, 1979

5 Op. cit p. 25

6 Op. cit p. 26

We need to be careful not to exaggerate. In Romans Ch 16 twenty seven men are mentioned and eight women (ten if Junias and Persis are women) who are highly esteemed. The references are significant. In 1 Corinthians six men are mentioned by name and two important women (Chloe and Prisca). In Philippians two women (Euodia and Syntyche) and four men are named. In Colossians one woman is mentioned in comparison to eleven men while in Philemon his wife (or is she his daughter) is mentioned with Archippus. While Paul's major collaborators (Timothy, Sylvanus and Titus) are mentioned in other letters (2 Corinthians 1.2. Thessalonians, Galatians, Ephesians) neither other men or women are referred to by name.

Two questions arise. What was the role of the women at whose houses a church assembled and what was the nature of the work done by women who are said to have worked with or for Paul or for the Gospel. In particular we may ask about Prisca, mentioned at times before her husband (Rom 16:3; Acts 18:18-26; 2 Tim 4:18 but not in 1 Cor 16:19 and Acts 18:2), Euodia and Syntyche: and Phoebe, an outstanding gentile Christian woman. Did she bring his letter to Rome?

Paul uses *diakonon* about Phoebe who is described as a *prostatis* (helper) to many besides Paul. She probably held an official position in her community being responsible for "the practical service of the needy" (*diakonos* Rom 12:7; 15:31; 1 Cor 5:16; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1; 12:13; 11:8). Probably *prostatis* also implies an official administrative gift. In Rom 12:8 a similar term is used in the description of charisms, one some where between words referring to generous contributions and cheerful acts of mercy.

Prisca is a *sunergos* who risked her neck to save Paul possibly in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-40). This term when used by Paul (Rom 16:2-21; 2 Cor 3:23; Phil 2:25; 4:3; (Col 4:11); Philem 1:24) refers to some activity directly related to the service of the Gospel which was the core of Paul's life and his only real concern.

Praising Mary and the sisters, Tryphaena and Tryphosa(?) ("Workers in the Lord") and possibly another woman Persis a freed woman (Rom 16:12), Paul uses the term *kopiaio* (Rom 16:6. 12 (2); 1 Cor 15:10; 16:16; Gal 4:11; Phil 2:16; 1 Thess 5:12; Col 1:24. We could also include the many references to *kopos*). This term refers normally to hard work in ministry. These women are highly commended for it.

Finally Euodia and Syntyche strove at the side of Paul (*sunethlesan*) (cf 1 Thess 2:2) in the service of the Gospel (Phil 4:2). The possibility is that Junias (RSV) of Rom 16:7 was a woman, wife of Andronicus, who with her husband was an early Jewish convert, an itinerant preacher (apostle in a broad sense) and was imprisoned for the Gospel⁷.

It does not seem likely that the actual work of these women was restricted or even it included the provision of food and shelter to Paul and others. He did live and work during his stay in Corinth with Prisca and Aquila who had possibly an independent ministry prior to this. However, these women seem to have been involved in the growth of the believing community. Referring to Prisca, Kasemann says that these women had access to the *gunaikonitis* (women's apartments in a house) and concludes "This part played by the Christian women in the formation of the first churches has rarely been paid sufficient attention"⁸.

Without entering into a discussion of the "house churches", we may say, the allusion to "the Church at their house" (1 Cor 16:1; 9; Col 4:15; Rom 16:5; (14-15); Philem 2) probably refers to the community which regularly met in their homes and not just the joint family and their dependents, as can be inferred from the problem in Corinth⁹.

We must note that all major responsibilities were given to men and Paul's major collaborators were men. From all these texts it may be inferred that significant women played important roles within the pauline churches, though the texts give us no basis for arguments about the participation of women in the ordained ministry as it is today. Such arguments need to find their basis in other considerations.

Paul's audience

In the authentic letters we note immediately that Paul uses "brothers" when addressing the whole believing community. We get the impression that he is more conscious of the men in the community than of the women, though the language, similar to ours, could actually be "neutral" even if in their patriarchal

7 C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, T.T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1979, pp. 788-89 Chrysostom and Lagrange shared this opinion.

8 E. Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980, p.413

9 1 Cor 11:17-22. Cf. Murphy O'Connor, *Paul's Corinth*, pp 156-161.

attitude to life men read the letters in an exclusive way doing Paul an injustice. However, I am inclined to think that Paul shared the common patriarchal perspective on life and was normally addressing the Christian men directly. This is clear when he deals with problems concerning sexuality (1 Cor Chs 5,6.; 1 Thess 4:3-8), probably with the problems of scandal in eating sacrificial meat and not observing Jewish taboos (1 Cor 8,10:23-11:1; Rom 14), law cases (1 Cor 6:1-11), the leadership of the opposition groups to Paul in the Corinthian Church (2 Cor 2:5-11; 7:12; 11:13-15 and 1 Cor 1-4), the problem of circumcision (Galatians; Phil 3 and Romans) and Philemon's slave. In his long discussions of the Jew-Gentile (circumcised and uncircumcised) problem, though circumcision refers to the Jewish Community yet the patriarchal character of Judaism would determine the audience and give a definite male character to his argumentation. Discussing marriage (1 Cor 7) and sexual perversity (Rom 1:26-27) he moves back and forth from husband to wife, man to woman. At other times we cannot be sure of the audience Paul has in mind since the male language can be inclusive and ethical exhortations and instructions on worship (1 Cor 11-14) can include all. At least the strife between Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2) would be an example of the problems about unity to which Paul pays careful attention in Phil 1:27-2:16

Problematic texts

The problematic texts which have brought Paul into disrepute as being a misogynist are: 1 Cor 14:34-35; 11:2-16; and Col 3:18-19; Eph 5:22-33 and the worst text often attributed to him 1 Tim 2:9-15. The instruction in Timothy about women reflects a very strong patriarchal attitude and the common views found in Wisdom writings. It belongs to the end of the first century. This text like other aspects of the Pastoral letters reflects a stage in Christian life when the Gospel has been accommodated to the structure of social life and cultural traditions in a very marked way.

None of the universally accepted letters of Paul have the household exhortations which we find in a brief form in Colossians (3:18-4:1- *wives-husbands, children-fathers, slaves-masters*; note the inferior-superior pattern and the emphasis on the duty of subordination of wives, children and slaves) and the more detailed exhortation in Ephesians (5:21-6:9 with the same pattern). The

duties of the male are to love (wife), not provoke/ bring up... (children) and treat justly.... / forbear threatening.... (slaves). The social structure of the Greco-Roman world is here accepted and the type of relationship expected in the Jewish and non-Jewish society and taught by social custom and the ethical instructions have been incorporated into a particular understanding of the mystery of Christ.

Marriage (1 Cor 7)

Though he takes up the husband's duties first in his treatment of problems linked to marriage yet Paul gives no clear sign of a subordination but rather an equality of rights and duties in his initial instructions on marriage (7:1-7) and later remarks on being unmarried or married (7:25-35). Dealing with divorce he begins with the case of the woman and advises both in the same way, accepting equal rights for both (7:10-16). There is clear evidence of woman's rights when he says that the widow can marry whomsoever she wishes (7:39). In the other case (7:36-38) it is unclear to whom Paul refers, a man and his fiancée or a father and his daughter. If he refers to the case of the father and daughter then he accepts the father's duty and right to arrange her marriage. Paul does not pay attention to the girl's wishes. Finally in his writings he reflects the common negative attitude to prostitution.

Silence in worship (1 Cor 14:34-35)

The most problematic texts concern women's behaviour on the occasion of community worship. We shall commence with 1 Cor 14:33b-36 in which the writer in accordance with the universally accepted custom (33b if part of the instruction and not linked to 14:26-33) commands that women¹⁰ (could be specifically wives) keep totally silent in the assemblies ("churches - church = assembly) as an expression of subordination which is also commanded by the Law. If they want an explanation they can ask their husbands at home, but not during worship. The writer concludes that "it is shameful for a woman to speak in the meeting of the Congregation" (14:35). The tone is severe and uncompromising and the content indicates that the writer intends to

10 The writer may only refer to wives who were accustomed to question, argue or discuss with their husbands during the meetings and so cause disorder. Cf W.F. Orr, J. A. *Walter 1 Corinthians*, Doubleday New York, '76, pp.311-313.

stamp out a local practice which is totally unacceptable to him and flouts universal christian custom, the Law and reflects a type of arrogance if 14:36 is to be linked to vv. 34-35¹¹.

There are two main approaches to the text¹². An ever increasing number of scholars judge the text to be an addition after Paul's death. This concern for women/wives breaks the flow of the thought and introduces an alien topic since Paul is concerned with speaking in tongues and prophecy and community order. Omitting 14:34-35 (or 33b-36) the text flows easily from 14:33a to 14:37. If 'to speak' refers to prophecy/prayer, and there are no good reasons to doubt this, then the text contradicts 11:5 where Paul expects women to participate fully in worship. The appeal to the "Law" as an authority is very unusual for Paul. Finally the tone, content and perspective echoes clearly the later concern for order and conformity to social customs which we find in the Pastorals and specifically 1 Tim 2:11-14.

If the text is from Paul's hand then his concern for order and the building up of the community has led him to impose silence on those who speak in tongues (14:28) and on prophets in some cases (14:30). Probably he responds to a situation where wives/women interrupt the meeting in some ways. He refers to the accepted social customs of women's behavior in public in the Greco-Roman world, according to which they are subordinate to their husbands whom they are to respect and not shame.

Personally, I judge there are better reasons to take the text to be an addition, not to save Paul but to respect the integrity of the letter and the arguments brought forward.

Veiled at public worship? (1Cor 11:16)

We turn to an undisputed pauline instruction about women at worship and specifically the arguments he uses. The point he wishes to make is clear, namely that in public worship women and men are to dress according to the social norms of the culture. In Jewish and the Greco-Roman world women normally covered their heads in public. Therefore women are to have their heads

11 There is a difference of opinion among commentators whether the text about women is confined to vv 34-35 which are found after v.40 in some textual traditions or ought include 33b and 36 both of which could be directly linked together and to 14:26-33a as a conclusion.

12 Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman*, pp.63-64.

covered in worship. This custom is the norm in all the churches and is to be followed in Corinth. Women and men have equal rights to and equal mode of participation in worship. Both may pray and prophesy. The women must be veiled¹³. Though Paul uses an analogy of short hair (man) and long hair (woman) to argue for the veil yet the problem does not concern hair style nor sexual morality¹⁴. Also there does not seem to be sufficient reasons to claim that Paul is imposing on the community a specially Jewish custom.

What reasons led the women to pray and prophesy without veils are obscure. Whatever be the reasons the theological underpinning Paul gives to his instruction demands attention. One argument is built around the relationship described in terms of "head" (11:3 and 4. In this latter verse head is used in a natural and symbolic sense). The second argument is constructed around an interpretation of Gen 1:26 in the light of Gen 2:21-23 according to which woman originates from man (11:7-9). The third argument is an analogy drawn from nature (and related social customs) which endows women with long hair which is a source of justifiable social pride while wearing long hair is a disgrace for men. We shall concentrate on the first two arguments. The conclusion drawn from 11:3-9 is "That is why a woman ought to have authority (veil) on her head on account of the angels" (11:10)¹⁵. To these arguments and his conclusion Paul adds a corrective (*plen*) to which we shall return (11:11-12).

The whole argument is placed within a very broad theological horizon, namely God as the source of all relationships and life (11:3 "the head of Christ is God" and 11:12 "all things are from God"). The basis of his arguments is the relationship of woman to man, man to Christ/God and Christ to God. This

13 H. Conzelmann *1 Corinthians*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1975, p.184 and fn 35.

14 Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman* pp.36-40 against J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Sex and Logic in 1 Corinthians". CBQ 48 (1980) 482-500. There are many articles on this passage. I cite one of which I know through Byrne's book but which was unavailable to me at the time of writing J. Delobel "1 Cor 11,2-16: Towards a Coherent Interpretation: in (A.Vanhoye, ed) *L'Apotre Paul* (BETL 73, Leuven, University Press, 1986) pp. 369-98 and its bibliographic references.

15 Another translation would be "That is why a woman, if only for fear of offending the angels, ought to have on her head something signifying her (subject to) authority" H. W. Cassirer, *God's New Covenant, A New Testament Translation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989. (The () inserted by me).

relationship forms the basic structure of creation and has to find its expression in life and specifically in worship. The relationship is partial subordination but more importantly a relationship of derivation of life and authority (rights). Christ is not subordinate/subject to God but derives his life and authority from God (Head). Man derives his Christian life and authority (rights) from Christ (Head) and from God through Christ who is active in creation (1 Cor 8:6). Woman derives her life and authority (rights) from man. The interpretation of the Genesis account of creation in 1:26 blurs and partially distorts the text since *Adam* is only the Male [Note: Man is the image and glory of God and woman (image of God is probably understood) is the glory of man (11:7)] The justification of this derivation of woman through the mediation of man is the account of Genesis 2:21-23 (woman from/for man 11:8-9). The social sign of this relationship and the derivation of woman's rights is the veil.

Woman has the right to pray and prophecy in public provided she wears the veil as a sign of the derivation of her life and authority (right) from man while a man, with uncovered head, indicates socially his derivation from God through Christ. One has to admit that the argument is not convincing. In 11:10 the veil (*exousia* = authority to do) is a sign that woman exercises her right in the public forum in the socially (theologically?) correct way.

So the text does reflect an understanding of woman not subject to man but woman whose existence and rights are derived from God through man. This reality has to come to expression in worship. Not a very convincing argument really as Genesis is misunderstood and arguments are sought for a custom which Paul has decided cannot be challenged.

However, Paul has confined himself to a corner and attempts to correct possible harmful conclusions. He wants to balance both the argument of derivation and implied subordination (11:8 *ek/dia*) by the affirmations of mutual interdependence at least and probably equality (11:11-12). The idea of equality depends on the meaning to be given to *choris* (11:11). Normally the term is translated in the sense of "without" (independent of) but there are good reasons to argue that the term means in our text "not different from/not other than"¹⁶. Therefore, Paul would

16 J. Kurzinger, "Frau und Mann nach 1 Kor 11,11ff" BZ 22(1978) pp. 270-275. A number of scholars accept this sense now.

affirm that as Christians "in the Lord" man and woman are not different and are according to God's plan (11:12); though woman originally was taken from man, yet man is forever born of woman.

It is my considered opinion that Paul does affirm clearly and consistently the radical equality and interdependence of man and woman, husband and wife and at the same time, as in other areas of human life, so in this accepts socio-cultural customs and behaviour which do not give adequate expression to the profound reality of human existence as willed by God and profoundly affirmed and healed by Christ. He would not accept "veils", were that custom to call into question in a clear way the profound reality as willed by God in Christ. His arguments are inadequate as he himself realises when he concludes by saying to those who may wish to carry on the argument and continue to flout socio-cultural customs in the context of worship that he and the churches do not accept any other custom.

A new unity in Christ (Gal 3:26-28)

We must now look at a basic Pauline text which will throw light on the apparent discrepancy between his theological insight and his acceptance of socio-cultural and economic structures which contradict the insight of faith to a greater or lesser degree.

The text we shall consider is: "indeed, you are, one and all *sons of God* through your faith in Christ Jesus. And this is the truth of the matter. As many of you as were baptized into union with Christ have clothed yourselves *with Christ as your garment*. No more *Jew or Gentile*, no more *slave or free man*, no more *male or female*. United to Christ Jesus all are *one person*" (3:26-28).

The new and radical character of the existence of every Christian person is described by means of three symbolic phrases: all-sons of God, as many as... clothed...with Christ and all-one person. Coming into profound contact with Christ through faith and the ritual expression of this all share in a common new reality.

To highlight the all-embracing nature and profundity of the change Paul indicates how the major religio-cultural division (Jew-Gentile), the socio-economic split (slave-free man) and finally the anthropological diversity (male-female) have been transcended and abolished.

In the same letter Paul radically relativizes the religio-

cultural division in other terms. He writes: "And indeed neither circumcision nor the want of it has any meaning for those who have united themselves to Christ Jesus. There is only one thing which counts: faith finding its expression in love" (5:6). Later in the same letter he will affirm: "As for circumcision or the want of it, they count for nothing. What counts is that a new creature should have been born (6:15).

Leaving out of consideration similar affirmations in Col 3:11 we recall his statement in 1 Cor 12:13 "...for we were, *all of us*, baptized, and that by virtue of the one Spirit, to form a *single body*, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free men alike".

Conclusion

Reading Paul and both listening to and analysing the contemporary situation of woman we would not accept many of the socio-economic, religio-cultural norms, expectations and customs today, because they do infringe upon the dignity, equality and rights of woman. Paul will provide aspects of a theological vision but neither Paul nor Jesus nor any part of Scripture will absolve us of our responsibility to transform social structures which are oppressive or offer us concrete solutions or prevent us from taking our decisions.

However, we also know that the richness of our faith vision does not take adequate shape in the socio-cultural structures of modern society no more than it did within Paul's community or among Jesus' own group of disciples. There is always the journey to be undertaken so that the Christian community be one in the complexity of social structures, and that the human community become really one community. In one sense there is not male and female and yet there is male and female and all the rich and distorted expressions of this diversity. Faith must find its expression in love which is impossible when justice is absent. We become aware of some of the ways injustice shows its face in each generation and blind to others. Our generation has to tackle its problems with humble realism and courageous action to lessen the injustices written into the socio-cultural and religious future of the human and Christian society. We can learn not to attempt to find theological reasons to justify customs and norms which are societal in origin and do not deserve the underpinning of faith or theological reflection. Let us not ask too much of Paul nor be blind to the insights he does provide.

Jesus' Option for Women

Emancipation of women from discriminative attitudes, unjust systems and structures of exploitation created by a male-dominated society is a crying need today, especially in India where, as is well known, they are denied even the right to be born, let alone the other forms of injustice. A study on how Jesus related to women would be very instructive for us to form our attitudes according to his example and teaching and to continue the task of the liberation of women which was so dear to his heart.

I. Jesus' inner freedom in his relationships with women

The Gospels clearly show that Jesus' relationships with the many women he met during his ministry were marked by a unique inner freedom and serenity. He was not constrained by the Jewish prejudices and taboos which governed the dealings of men with women. U. Luz gives us a summary of the teaching of the Jewish rabbis:

One should beware of unnecessary contact with women; this results from the intensified interpretation of the 6th commandment. One should not speak with a woman unnecessarily, not even with one's own. On the street one should not walk behind a woman, not greet her and not be served by a woman, not be alone with another woman, for already the voice and the hair of a woman are immoral. Of course, one should not look at a woman, not even at an unmarried one, for one is in danger by doing so. These Jewish statements belong to a tendency which was intensifying at that time to keep women out of public life, even the religious life. Without question, Jesus is *not* to be counted in this tendency, despite ascetic inclinations¹.

In his healing ministry Jesus spontaneously touched women. To heal Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus is going over to the sick woman, bending towards her, touching her, taking her by the hand and raising her up (Mk 1:29-31 and par.). This is quite

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1990) p. 296

remarkable because Jewish custom did not permit a respected rabbi or religious leader to touch or take a woman by the hand. In order to raise the daughter of Jairus, Jesus took the young girl by the hand (Mk 5:41). The note of Mark that the girl was twelve years old, that is, of marriageable age, may be significant; it would have been considered improper for an unmarried young man to touch her; but Jesus acted with unusual freedom of spirit. Similarly he healed the crippled woman in the synagogue laying his hands upon her (Lk 13:13).

Jesus allowed himself to be touched by women without any nervousness or anxiety. The woman with a flow of blood, which means in a state of continual ritual impurity, touched him stealthily from behind, probably because she was aware of the impropriety of her action; for the touch of an unclean woman was considered to be defiling. He constrained her to confess in public the whole truth, thereby affirming her privilege and freedom, thus bringing to the attention of the people that he was touched by the unclean woman. Jesus showed no disapproval of the defiling touch; indeed, he praised her for her faith, and, so to say, gave her back the healing she had seemingly stolen, and addressed her with tenderness: "Daughter,...be healed of your disease" (Mk 5:34). Jesus did not allow the taboo of feminine uncleanness to interfere with his saving activity.

At Bethany Jesus willingly accepted the loving service of an anonymous woman who poured a jar of ointment on his head (Mk 14:3). He praised this extravagant expression of affection as a very beautiful deed, prophetically anticipating his burial rite. Particularly moving are the gestures of the sinful woman in Lk 7:36-50, who touched Jesus in an intimate way: she washed his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, anointed them and went on kissing them. It was shocking for those present that Jesus, the young, celibate teacher allowed himself to be so caressed and kissed by the notorious woman. But Jesus betrayed no trace of annoyance or embarrassment; in fact, contrasting her affectionate gestures with the mere formal hospitality of the Pharisee, he emphasized that it pleased him very much indeed as an expression of her faith, gratitude and love.

Jesus' close friendship with Martha and Mary must have been well known; John says: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister" (Jn 11:5), and the scene in Lk 10:38-44 confirms it. Occasionally

he visited them (cf. also Jn 12:1-8). Jesus appears to have been totally free from any embarrassment about this relationship.

Thus we see Jesus, going against the Jewish convention and custom, speaking with women freely. His dialogue with the Samaritan woman drew surprise from his disciples (Jn 4:27). He comforted the mourning widow of Nain: "do not weep" (Lk 7:13). He engaged in extended dialogue with the legally impure pagan woman (Mk 7:24-30). Noteworthy is the scene in the home of Martha and Mary where Jesus is quite at home with the two sisters, teaching them and enjoying their hospitality (Lk 10:38-44).

We have seen enough examples of the extraordinarily deep interior freedom and peace which characterized Jesus' personal relationship with women². His ability to relate to them with ease and tranquillity showing affectionate concern for them in their various cares and accepting their loving gestures with perfect self-composure was unparalleled in his Jewish milieu. This well balanced calm and relaxed attitude of Jesus seems to have encouraged women to approach him with far greater freedom than was customary among the Jews. In fact, women who had been healed became his followers and accompanied him in his travels, as we shall see below.

II. Woman, not sexual object but human person

Jewish society made serious efforts to discriminate women imposing severe restrictions on relationships with them so as to avoid sexual temptation. According to the rabbis any social contact between man and woman would lead inevitably to sexual desire, which was felt to be uncontrollable. Hence they tried to shield woman by veiling and secluding her. The presence of woman was viewed as creating an inescapable danger to man's morality and so they sought to protect him by keeping woman off from his sight; for woman is by nature seductress; even the sight of woman is seductive! If woman is looked upon primarily as a sexual partner of man, any contact between them would lead to sexual desire and the only remedy for this unhealthy situation would be to seclude woman from social life. Thus in the

2 Cf. Moloney Francis J., *Woman: First Among the Faithful* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988), 10; Evans Mary, *Woman in the Bible* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 44, 48

Jewish society relationship between man and woman was poisoned by the onesided view of woman as mainly a sexual being³.

Jesus did not approve of these views of Judaism; as we have seen, he mixed freely and naturally with women and expected his disciples to do the same. He rejected the idea that lust is uncontrollable. He did not warn them against looking at women, but against looking at them lustfully: "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). This is Jesus' adaptation of the tenth commandment. Lustful look, unless it is controlled, would lead to passionate desire and adultery in the heart.

Jesus considered sexual urge controllable and he wanted his disciples to control their lust rather than avoid women. For this, his disciples must first of all make their own Jesus' views about women. As M. Evans writes:

Women are to be recognized as subjects in their own right, as fellow human beings, fellow disciples, and not just the objects of men's desire. Their life and rights are to be recognized as important and not to be endangered by the natural desires of men. Once it is recognized that women are people who can be related to in other ways than sexual desire, and once it is acknowledged that lust is not only sin but deliberate sin...then there is no longer any necessity to avoid social contact⁴.

Secondly the heart of man must be freed from all lustful thoughts and desires. It is not the presence of women that is dangerous but the unchecked passionate desires which dominate the heart of man. Jesus taught that the heart of man is the source of all impurity, evil thoughts, fornication and adultery (Mk 7:21-23). He declared the pure of heart blessed (Mt 5:8). Jesus wants his disciples to acquire this purity of heart and to develop the ability to control sinful thoughts and desires, which is essential for establishing chaste relationships with women⁵. Jesus' teaching about plucking out the eye that causes you to sin etc. (Mt 5:29-30), although not to be taken literally, shows how earnestly the disciples should undertake the task of purifying their looks and

3 Cf. Hurley James B., *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 63-66; Evans, 45; Jeremias, J. *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1969) 360-361

4 Evans, 45-46

5. Cf. Hurley, 108-110

touches. K. Bornhaeuser summarizes Jesus' teaching:

Among you there must under no circumstances arise a desire towards another man's wife. You must be able to look at another man's wife without being seduced. You must be able to touch her hand without excitement. There must exist between you and the woman an association that is and remains pure and free from sensuality. It is your duty to bring about a purification of the relations between men and women... This is an act of charity towards the female sex. To speak freely with woman without considering her an evil thing, to be able to take her hand in purity is to honour her. To pinch together the eyes and keep back the hand is to insult her⁶.

Jesus' categorical prohibition of divorce also, as we shall see below, teaches that women are not sexual objects which men can discard at will after use; they are as much human persons as men, who enter into a divinely established partnership of equals. As G. Blaquiere writes:

Through human love in marriage, Jesus offers to man a fundamental freedom from the condition which original sin produced in him - the temptation to power, and in particular, power over the woman, reducing her to an object of desire, as something to be possessed, used, rejected, entirely at the mercy of his caprice and needs⁷.

These original teachings of Jesus created a completely new attitude to social contact between the sexes among Jesus' disciples. Men and women began to mix freely in Jesus' company, having been liberated from sexual preoccupations and fears. A large group of women together with the Twelve formed the Jesus group in Galilee (Lk 8:1-3). "Jesus accepts women into the group of disciples because he expects his disciples to control their desires"⁸. It is noteworthy that Jesus' enemies, so eager to accuse him of all sorts of serious crimes, like blasphemy and sorcery, did not accuse him or his disciples of any sexual misbehaviour. Even slight sexual misconduct would have damaged the ministry of Jesus.

6 K. Bornhaeuser, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Madras CLS; 1951) 61-62

7 Blaquiere Georgette, *The Grace to be a Woman* (New York: Alba House, 1983), 18

8 J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971) 227

III. Liberation of Women by Jesus

Jesus conceived his mission in terms of the liberating evangelization of the Spirit-filled preacher of Is 61:1-3 and he announced this in the programmatic inaugural sermon at Nazareth (Lk 4:16-21). We shall study some aspects of Jesus' liberating ministry in favour of women who were among the oppressed, the captives and the poor for whom he was sent.

1. From a spirit of infirmity

The healing of a woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath is highly significant (Lk 13:10-17)⁹. She was bent over and could not straighten up due to "a spirit of infirmity" (v.11) through which "Satan had bound her for eighteen years" (v. 16). Her bent condition is a paradigm of the suppressed and disadvantageous condition of women in the male-dominated Jewish society, where they could not stand straight and claim their rights. The anonymous woman, resigned to her accustomed miserable lot slipped into the last place, at the back of the synagogue avoiding the public eye. Yet Jesus' compassionate eyes reached her and he called her to himself. Laying his hands upon her he spoke his word of healing and instantly she stood straight and praised God – significantly on the Sabbath.

In his answer to the ruler of the synagogue Jesus emphasized the worth of the woman by calling her "a daughter of Abraham" (v.16), a unique and unparalleled title given to a woman. As a daughter of Abraham she should not remain a moment longer under the bondage of Satan. Her immediate healing was the sign that the bonds of Satan are being broken by the powerful coming of the Kingdom of God. The liberation of this bent woman and restoration to her dignity as a daughter of Abraham are privileged signs of the liberation of the Kingdom of God announced by Isaiah now in progress through Jesus' ministry. Women have equal rights with men for the blessing of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was ready to risk bitter opposition of the leaders of the Jews to release the woman from the bonds of Satan even on the Sabbath,

Lk 8:2 tells us that Jesus had liberated many women from evil spirits and other infirmities. The most prominent among them

9 Cf. Blaquiére 4-10, Witherington, 68-71

was Mary Magdalene¹⁰ possessed by seven demons, that is under a very severe possession causing an extreme form of affliction, comparable to that of the man possessed by a legion (Mk 5:1-20). Jesus liberated her with his gentle touch and saving word. Transformed by the power of Jesus she became a most faithful and devoted disciple of Jesus. Lk 8:1-3 says that many such liberated women became his followers and helpers in the ministry.

2. From the suspicion of uncleanness

"Woman is a being under suspicion: she is suspected of being impure because she is a woman, of being polluted by the most natural physiological laws of her sexuality."¹¹ The woman with a flow of blood (Mk 5:21-34) was afflicted by "this curse of being a woman"¹² in a pitiable way: it was not just the usual monthly flow but uninterrupted flow of blood lasting twelve years. Jewish law regarded such women as unclean (Lev 15:19, 25); it placed "a burden upon the woman because of her sexuality, a kind of curse, more or less conscious which crushed her and isolated her within a feeling of ill-defined shame"¹³. What the woman of the Gospel, oppressed by her guilt and shame, needed most was healing from "this secret wound of her unconscious"¹⁴. Since her impurity was considered contagious she did not dare to approach Jesus publicly. We know the rest of the story about her wonderful healing and Jesus' total disregard of the taboos of purity and impurity. Jesus was not concerned at all about purification for the woman or for himself. According to him there is nothing defiling or cursed in the natural functions of female sexuality. A woman with a flow of blood is not an unclean creature to be shunned; she is as worthy of personal relationship with Jesus as his chosen disciples. This is a message of liberation for all modern women who are not comfortable with their femininity.

3. From overemphasis of the generative function

The controversy about "wives in the future life" (Mk 12: 18-27 par) shows that woman's maternal function has only a

10 Cf. Moltman-Wendel Elisabeth, *The Women Around Jesus* (London:SCM, 1982) 68-73

11 Blaquiére, 26

12 Blaquiére 28, Cf. Witherington Ben, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: University press, 1987), 72-72

13 Blaquiére, 30

14. Ibid.

limited significance¹⁵. For the Jews, the prime function of marriage was guaranteeing a posterity for perpetuating the family and transmitting the family heritage to a legitimate heir; in this the fecundity of the woman was decisive. "In the Jewish conception, the woman only exists to give children to men; this is the sole glory and justification of her life...woman is first of all 'mother', she who assures the perpetuity of the people"¹⁶. This is why sterile women in the Old Testament, like Sara, Hanna and others, experienced mental agony and humiliation.

Jesus taught that in the world of the resurrection, in the presence of the God of the living, neither do men marry nor are women given in marriage, but they are like heavenly angels (Mk 12:25). "Marriage and the fruitfulness attached to it are transitory states, limited to this world."¹⁷ This is particularly significant for woman, for her salvation as a person and her risen existence are dissociated from her generative function.

The personhood of the woman is identifiable neither with her fruitfulness nor with her sexuality. She exists as a person in her own right, born of God and for God, and her future in the Kingdom is a future of freedom and life, in a communion with man founded on relationships of equality and no longer of dependence. All are equally children of God because children of the resurrection¹⁸.

A similar personalist perspective about marriage and its procreative function is made clear by Jesus saying on "eunuchs" who remain single out of free decision: their motivation is eschatological, for the sake of the Kingdom of God (Mt 19:12). Jesus rejected the rabbinic teaching that marriage and procreation were a divine command obliging all men and women. According to him two equally valid ways of life are open to his disciples: permanent marriage in life-long fidelity or celibacy for the kingdom of God¹⁹.

Family bonds and functions have only a temporary and relative significance. As heirs of the Kingdom of God, men and women have a personal destiny which transcends the boundaries of their physical family. That is why Jesus says: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mk 3:35). Beyond her maternal function in her marriage woman is daughter of God, sister of Jesus and of all his disciples²⁰.

15 Cf. Witherington, 32-35; Blequiere, 20-26.

16 Blequiere, 20.

17. Blequiere, 23.

18. Ibid.

19 Cf. Hurley, 106-107. Witherington, 28-32.

20 Cf. Schuessler-Florenza Elisabeth, *In Memory of her* (London: SCM, 1988) 144-145.

These teachings of Jesus paved the "way to true liberation of woman by regarding woman as a person in her own right and not solely as wife and potential mother"²¹.

4. From the suspicion of being a seductress

Suspected of being guilty because she is a woman imprisoned in a fundamental culpability, daughter of Eve, temptress of man, responsible for the evil in the world, responsible for the fall of man, woman lives...imprisoned by the mistrust of man²².

Wisdom books contain repeated warnings against woman as temptress (e.g. see Prov. 7:6-27). The story of the woman caught in adultery is quite instructive (Jn 8:1-11)²³. We see the pathetic picture of this woman, caught in the very act of intercourse, trapped by at least two witnesses, perhaps hired by her husband; pushed into the centre by her accusers, isolated, overwhelmed by shame and fear, bent under the burden of the scorn and contempt of the jeering crowd. Mosaic law enjoins for adultery death by stoning (Dt 22:22). With hypocritical zeal for the law, her accusers insist on their 'pound of flesh' by enforcing the law. Jesus' answer, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her", does not justify indifference towards unchastity; rather it strikes at the base motives of the accusers and witnesses who show no concern for the woman and her destiny in the eagerness to trap Jesus. He challenges their conscience. Sin is not the exclusive burden of woman. No woman can commit adultery alone; it is the communal sin of man and woman. But the male dominated society deals with woman's sin with extra severity. Jesus condemns the system in which man's lust is lightly treated, while woman's seduction, whatever the circumstances, is harshly punished. Before God, indeed, both man and woman are sinners, needing repentance and forgiveness.

In the end, Jesus is left alone with the woman. No one has condemned her; Jesus also does not condemn her, but only throws a challenge at her to begin a new life of purity and fidelity; he offers her a chance of renewal.

Man has the habit of settling the problem of evil by throwing the mud on woman alone: "It is the woman..." "Many

²¹ Blaquiere, 24.

²² Blaquiere, 27

²³ Cf. Witherington, 21-23; Blaquiere, 32-38; Moloney, 15-16

women have suffered and still suffer from such a simplistic notion. Jesus leads us into freedom by situating man and woman in the truth about themselves, that is to say, by placing us all in the "communion of sinners" called to repent.²⁴

5. From male dominance in marriage

Jesus' revolutionary teaching on marriage and divorce was the declaration of independence of woman from the unlimited power of the Jewish husband over his wife (Mt 19:2-10; Mk 10:2-12)²⁵. The question of the Pharisees (Mt 19:3) asks if there is any limit to the power of the husband over his wife when he wants to divorce her. The right of the husband to divorce his wife was never disputed the only question discussed was the grounds of divorce. The liberal school of Hillel gave unlimited freedom to the husband (for any cause). This is not surprising because according to Jewish tradition wife was the property of the husband and so he had property rights over her; she exists only to give him descendants and to satisfy his needs.

Jesus' answer declares emphatically the sanctity and permanence of marriage according to the original creative will of God. At the beginning God created man as a couple, a male and a female (Gen 1:27), because he wanted to unite them in one flesh (Gen 2:24). In marriage man will leave his parents and join his wife into a one flesh union; this is the consequence of God's creative act and purpose. "One flesh" suggests the close, intimate union between husband and wife achieved through the bodily unity and fulfilment produced by sexual intercourse. The bodily sexual union of the couple is here very highly evaluated in the light of God's plan. Obviously, it fosters personal bond and spiritual communion between the couple.

The conclusion of Jesus' teaching is an unconditional prohibition: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Mk 10:9). It is God who joins the couple into a sacred and unbreakable one-flesh-union; and so any attempt of man to separate them contradicts his creative will and plan. Moses' permission of divorce is rejected as merely a concession to man's hardness and insensitivity of heart produced through continued disobedience to God's original will. Jesus thus condemned all the gross injustice and cruelty perpetrated against women by their hard-hearted husbands, exercising unlimited power over them derived from rabbinic interpretations of the law of Moses.

The dominance of man over woman is the result not only of man's hardness of heart but also of woman's lust for man (Gen 3:16). Only a true interior conversion that heals man's hardness of heart and purifies woman's lust of heart will allow them to live out the divine ideal of marriage partnership without

24. Blaquiere, 37. 25. Cf. Witherington, 18-28; Hare, 85-106; Squiere 12-19.

succumbing to the temptations of domination of woman on the part of man and of servitude to man on the part of woman.

When Jesus opens up to woman the possibilities of freedom and allows her to become herself, the man loses a slave but rediscovers the companion that God had "brought to the man", a partner who is free and equal, complementary but not identical. In union with each other, man and woman discover fullness of life and freedom²⁶.

5. Jesus' option for women

Women were, as we have seen, a suppressed and marginalized class in Jewish society. We have seen also that Jesus showed esteem for them, manifested concern and compassion for their suffering and took the initiative to help them in their need. He defended them against male arrogance, for example the sinful woman (Lk 7:30-50) or the woman who anointed him at Bethany (Mk 14:3-9) or the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8:1-11). Here we shall briefly study Jesus' concern for two specially afflicted classes of women, namely, widows and prostitutes.

Widow is a particularly poor woman, who has confronted death and loss and failure in a poignantly personal way. She has nothing more to hope for. Interior desolation and material poverty are her lot. In the Old Testament we find repeatedly the joining of widows with orphans and foreigners as the most needy classes of people (f. e. Dt 14:23). Jesus showed concern for widows in his sayings (Lk 4:25; 12:2-8, Mk 12:40). He showed effective compassion for the widow who had lost her only son and sole means of support (Lk 7:11-17). Particularly striking is the story of the poor widow (Mk 12:41-44) who possessed nothing but two copper coins; without keeping anything for herself, she gave her all to God. Jesus saw the seemingly insignificant deed of the widow; and calling his disciples he solemnly extolled her as a model for generosity in discipleship.

In Israel prostitution was considered the worst form of pollution for a woman, and a prostitute was the paradigm for the unfaithful and idolatrous people of Israel. Schuessler Florenza gives us an idea of the social condition of prostitutes in Israel:

As is the case today, so in antiquity prostitutes were impoverished unskilled women... Prostitutes usually were slaves, daughters who had been sold or rented out by their parents, wives who were rented out by their husbands, poor women, exposed girls, the divorced and the widowed, single mothers, captives of war or piracy, women bought for soldiers - in short, women who could not derive a livelihood from their position in the patriarchal family or those who had to work for a living but

could not engage in "middle" or "upper-class" professions. In Palestine, torn by war, colonial taxation, and famine, the number of such women must have been great²⁷.

Jesus' option for this miserable class of women resounds in the saying in Mt 21:31-32: "Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the Kingdom of God before you". It was indeed, shocking for his hearers that prostitutes would enter the kingdom ahead of the pious and righteous Israelites. Presumably prostitutes were among the sinners who were drawing near to hear Jesus and with whom he was sharing his table (Lk 15:1-2; Mk 2:15-17). The story of the sinful woman of the city (Lk 7:36-50) is a good illustration of Jesus' attitude towards these miserable daughters of Abraham.

IV Women whom Jesus loved

Jesus fostered close friendships with women, two of whom are specially named in Lk and Jn. In 11:5 says: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus". The unusual naming of the sisters before their brother suggests that they were closer to Jesus. In Jn love is the prime characteristic of Jesus' relationship with his disciples; this is shown by many sayings about his love relationship with his disciple²⁸ and also by the Johannine expression, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26; 21:7,20). Martha and Mary whom Jesus loved were his specially dear disciples²⁹.

In the scene of Jesus receiving the hospitality of Martha and Mary (Lk 10:38-44) we can feel the intimacy of the meeting of Jesus with his friends alone in their home. Each of the sisters expressed her devoted love for him in her own characteristic way. Martha, the elder sister and hostess, more active by temperament, took charge of serving him and catering to his physical needs. Mary, on the contrary, quietly sat at Jesus' feet, in the position of a disciple (cf. Act 22:3) and attentively listened to his teaching. Jesus gently reproved Martha for distraction and trouble about many things in her concern to give him the best service, because she neglected the more important, indeed, the primary aspect of her relationship with Jesus: being a disciple attentive to his word. On the other side, he clearly approved Mary's attentive listening as "the one thing needful" and "the best portion". What he reproved in Martha was not her caring for the needs of her host but her anxiety about many things to the extent that she was not free for hearing his word. Martha disregarded the essential thing: being with Jesus, sitting at his feet and receiving his word

27. Schuessler Florenza, 128.

28. Jn 13:1,34, 14:16,21,23,24, 28, 15:9, 12:21:15,16,17.

29. Cf. Wernherington, 100-116; Moloney, 13,61,77-82; Blaquiere, 92-100.

with contemplative attentiveness. Martha thought of Jesus as the guest and of herself as the hostess; but in reality, Jesus was the host who served the bread of the word; Martha as well as Mary had first to be guests at Jesus' table of the word. G. Blaquiere writes to the point:

To listen, to love with her whole heart, to cherish the word in her heart and to convey it to the children of Israel: this... is the essential "diakonia" that Jesus has reserved for women... Here more than anywhere else, woman is the sign of the mystery of the new Israel, of the Church, straining with her whole being to hear the word of her Lord in love. Here also originates explicitly her vocation and her ministry as a prophet on behalf of God's people through a consecration of her whole being³⁰.

Martha and Mary play central roles in the story of the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44). Martha, more active and outspoken (as in Lk 10), went out to meet Jesus and spontaneously expressed her faith in the saving power of Jesus (vv 21-22). Rewarding her faith he spoke to her a solemn word of self-revelation: "I am the resurrection and the life..." (v.25-26). In response to it she made her marvellous confession of faith: "I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, he who is coming into the world" (v. 27). This word of Martha is no less sublime than the messianic confession of Peter in Mt 16:16. In John's Gospel it has profound significance as it stands at the centre of the final and most impressive of the seven signs of Jesus. Mary also was present in this scene; although she expressed her faith in Jesus' power (v. 32), she was overwhelmed with sorrow even at the feet of Jesus (v. 32-33).

In the supper at Bethany (Jn 12:1-8), Martha was present in her familiar role serving Jesus, as in Lk 10, but in this scene quietly, without any complaints. In order to show her love and gratitude for what he was to them and had done for her brother, who was also at table, she joyfully offered against rabbinic rules, her humble service to Jesus.

Mary expressed her gratitude to him in an extravagant way: she anointed Jesus' feet with precious ointment and wiped them with her hair; her actions suggest intimate affection, humble devotion and personal surrender. The anointing of Mary was marked by a loving prodigality in the quantity and quality of the ointment used: a pound of pure nard, costing 300 denarii, equivalent to 300 day's wages of a labourer. It was, indeed, an act of most generous love and devotion, which does not calculate but gives its utmost joyfully. It is remarkable that Mary's place is always at Jesus' feet (Lk 10:39; Jn 11:32; 12:3).

³⁰ Blaquiere, 94

Although witnesses saw in Mary's devotion nothing but the waste of the precious ointment, Jesus appreciated it very highly as a beautiful gesture of most personal love. In fact, he revealed its deeper prophetic meaning: it was a proleptic act of preparing Jesus' body beforehand in view of the burial to take place in a week. He promised that the memory of this loving deed would be part of the good news to be proclaimed all over the world, so that future generations of disciples might be inspired by this moving example of devotion.

Several aspects of Jesus' attitude towards women are shown by his relationship with Martha and Mary. He established close friendship with women and felt free to visit them, to help them in their need and to exchange affection with them. He enjoyed their hospitality in the intimacy of their home. He was willing to teach them even in private and he considered them worthy of the most sublime revelations. In fact he insisted that the primary task of women as well as men is not serving but hearing the word of God and living in obedience to it so as to please God.

V. Faithful disciples and witnesses

During Jesus' wandering ministry through the villages and cities of Galilee, not only the Twelve disciples but also many women accompanied him (Lk 8:1-3). These women had been healed by him from demons and infirmities, and out of gratitude they left their homes and followed him as his companions. In this, of course, they were encouraged by Jesus' liberal attitude, as we have seen, of ignoring the rabbinic custom of avoiding the company of women. Together with the Twelve they heard his teaching and witnessed his deeds. In return for his spiritual help they provided for Jesus and the Twelve from their financial resources. Mk 15:41 and par. confirms Lk's statement and adds that they served him (them); it means, probably, that in accordance with the traditional role of women they prepared food and served it to the missionary group. Without this support Jesus' ministry in Galilee would have been quite burdensome. His positive stance towards contact between the sexes free of lust, his teachings about the sanctity and permanence of marriage and about celibacy for the Kingdom made it possible for this mixed group to function effectively without conflicts and scandals.

These women followers of Jesus were present on Calvary at the momentous scenes of Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial (Mk 15:40-41,47 and par.). The Twelve were totally absent from these final events; it is not they, but these faithful women who were the witnesses to the central events of the Christian faith and preaching.

These women were also the first witnesses and proclaimers of the Easter message. They were the first to visit the tomb

of Jesus on Easter morning and to hear the paschal message from the heavenly messenger (Mk 16:1-8 and par.). They were also the first to see the risen Lord (Mt 28:9-10; Jn 20:11-18). Commissioned by the angel and Jesus himself the women actually announced the paschal message to the disciples (Lk 24:8-11), who reacted, of course, in accordance with their Jewish prejudices about women, with unbelief, for which they were rebuked by Jesus (Mk 16:14).

It is quite fitting that the first to hear the paschal message were those faithful women, whose unflinching loyalty and persevering attachment to Jesus brought them on Easter morning to the empty tomb and the paschal angel.

Schuessler Fiorenza emphasizes that the loyalty and witness of these Galilean women were decisive for the very continuation of the Jesus movement after the crucifixion³¹. Having come, through their Easter experience, to the faith that Jesus had indeed risen, they took the initiative to gather together the scattered disciples and friends of Jesus and kept alive the good news that Jesus is risen.

Evidence by women is not acceptable according to the Jews. But Christians depend on the witness of the faithful women disciples for the details of what happened during the last hour of Jesus' earthly career and on the first Easter morning.

Conclusion

The plight of Indian woman as a whole is probably not as bad as that of Jewish woman in the first century Palestine; in particular areas, however, her lot may be far worse. Too often we hear about wife-beating and wife-burning, dowry deaths, forced suicides, flesh trade and other sexual crimes against women. Women are still inferior, second-class citizens, suffering many disabilities and exploited as a source of cheap labour. In the Indian Church women are on the whole treated with fairness; but still many Christians hold sinful attitudes towards women. The Indian society, and the Indian Church in particular, urgently need to reflect on and rectify their wrong attitudes towards women in a spirit of repentance and reconciliation and learn to treat them with the reverence due to them as human persons, and with the love and concern due to them as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers.

Jesus' option for women, his defense of their dignity and his ministry for their emancipation provide us with inspiration and light for this rethinking, conversion of heart and effective action in their favour.

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